

CHOICE

**Summer drinks:
sugar water by any other name?**

**How to set up a home
theatre system**

**Saving schemes for education:
what to watch out for**

**Will
your ladder
let you
down?**



MORE TESTS

**68 cm TVs • Petrol lawn trimmers
• New Macintosh Performa**

Editorial



Jane Mackenzie

You'll find several articles about money in this issue — it's a topic that's never far from the top of many people's minds. How can you save or invest it, how can you make sure you'll be comfortable when you retire, and if you have to borrow it, how can you make sure you're getting the best deal?

The August 1996 Budget made several changes to the way super operates — some people benefitted, others lost out (see page 32 for details). But the major story in the super debate is still the fact that it simply won't give everyone a decent quality of life in retirement. If the aged pension was reduced or ceased to exist, far too many people wouldn't have enough to live on when they stopped working.

At this time of year savings plans targeted at your children's education are widely promoted. How do you know if they're a good place to invest your money? On page 12 we take one such scheme apart and point out its pros and cons. If your child 'qualifies' and there's a good return on investments, you could be in clover. But if you drop out of the scheme or your child doesn't finish their education, you could be as badly off as if you'd left your money under the bed.

Changes to the rules governing private health insurance (see page 4) at first look like a bonus for some groups of people: couples can now be charged a different rate from families, and a range of cheaper policies that exclude expensive treatments is now available. But does it mean insurance companies now have the chance to make 'family' rates more expensive? And will the cost of policies that do include expensive conditions such as hip replacement escalate so much that the very people who need to be insured for them can no longer afford them?

There's some genuine good news on the money front — the introduction last November of the Consumer Credit Code (see page 5). It should address long-standing problems such as hidden fees, misleading information, high levels of commission, overcharging and heavy-handed debt collection practices.

With continuing pressure for further deregulation of the money marketplace in the near future, CHOICE will be in the debate pushing for consumers' concerns and rights to be taken into account. We'll also be bringing you regular articles on all aspects of one of the most pressing of all consumer concerns: money.

In the meantime, the staff of CHOICE would like to wish you all a very happy New Year.

Jane Mackenzie, Editor

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January 1997

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How safe is your ladder? Of the 19 step, step-extension and 'multipurpose' ladders we tested, we can only recommend seven — the rest simply didn't pass our safety tests.
Cover photo: Kent Mears



Choice Regulars

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When you're choosing food in supermarkets, you'll come across consumer 'advice' such as the Heart Foundation's 'tick' and other symbols on some



products. Are foods with these symbols really any healthier than those without them?

Your letters

We welcome the letters you send us, but please always include a day-time telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow your letter up. We're sorry we can't personally answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.

Write to us at CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

Phone us on (02) 9577 3399.

Fax us on (02) 9577 3355.

e-mail us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au



▲ **Home surround sound:** as good as visiting the cinema?
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The changes made to super in last year's Budget were good for some people and bad for others, but super still won't give everyone a decent lifestyle in retirement.

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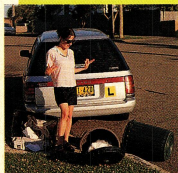
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Special saving schemes targeted at paying for your children's education are often promoted at this time of year, but are they the best place to invest your money?

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What are 'home theatre' and 'surround sound'? We look at what components you'll need for them, how to simplify your choice of systems, and what it will cost you.



Coming in the next three issues

Tests: Espresso machines, APS cameras, toasters, electric stoves, cooking oils, bank accounts, expensive washing machines, cordless phones, stereo VCRs, breadmakers.

◀ *Learning to drive* doesn't be a nightmare.

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The answers to questions you often ask our Consumer Information Service about CHOICE and the Consumers' Association.

Choice Tests

14 Quenching that thirst

Summer, heat, thirst — cool drinks. We take a look at the vast range of commercial drinks now available: what's in them other than sugar, and how can you save money quenching your thirst this summer?

26 Large-screen TVs

A 68 cm TV is just the thing to set off your surround-sound home theatre system, or simply to make viewing easier on the eyes. We found noticeable differences in both picture and sound quality among the 10 we tested.

36 Mac attack!

We pitted the new Macintosh Performa 5260/120 computer against the best of the PCs tested for last month's CHOICE, and found them neck-and-neck for performance.

41 Petrol lawn trimmers

While it's not too hard to find a trimmer that will give you good performance, we had lots of problems with the trimmers in just the short time of our test — manufacturers need to make their products more reliable.

▶ *A trimmer needs to be powerful to cope with long grass — but don't count on ease of use too. See page 41.*



Features: Over-the-counter painkillers, driving lessons, setting up a trust fund, annual car reliability report, satisfaction with mobile phones, conveyancing, how to cut energy use and costs, competition for local phone calls, fluoride in water, how good is your pharmacy?

We try to bring you tests and reports in the planned month, but sometimes have to move an article because of problems that occur during testing and research, or for lack of space in a particular issue. We apologise if this causes any inconvenience.

Check health insurance choices carefully

Private health insurance funds have been allowed to offer four different categories of fund membership since October last year.

Instead of a family or a single membership, which were previously the only options, funds can now offer different premiums for:

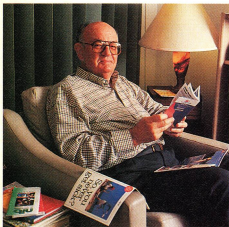
- 'Family' membership (at least two adults and one or more others, which may include children or grandparents, for example).
- 'Single-parent' membership (at least one adult, who is the contributor, and one or more dependent children).
- Single person's membership.
- Couple's membership.

Under the changes funds are no longer required to charge a family no more than twice the premium of a single person. While this might make some membership categories cheaper, it has raised concerns that family premiums may rise. We'll be watching this closely.

No matter what membership category you choose, check

carefully who is covered by the policy, as funds' rules can vary — for example, in how they define dependent children.

In addition, beware of products that exclude some medical procedures, such as hip replacements. If you want to risk taking a cheaper policy that doesn't cover some expensive procedures, make sure you know which procedures you're not covered for.



A wider selection of health insurance policies will mean you'll need to choose one even more carefully in future.

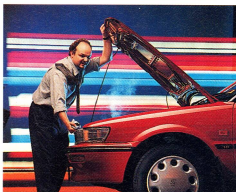
Car reliability winners

Thank you to everyone who took part in our 1996 Car Reliability Survey. As a result of your efforts, the response to the survey this year was the highest yet, with information on nearly 14,000 cars.

Participants in the survey were entered into a draw. The three lucky winners are:

- First prize: Carol Kain, of Salisbury East, SA, won a multi-disc CD player.
- Second prize: Cliff Holland, of Bracken Ridge, Queensland, won a 34 cm television.
- Third prize: John Perkins, of Kambah, ACT, won an answering machine.

Congratulations to all our winners — we hope you enjoy your prizes.



The results of this year's car reliability survey will be published in the March issue.

CAN YOU HELP?

CHOICE would like to know if you've had any problems dealing with your health insurance company or with the health care sector in general, including hospitals.

Your experiences will help us to lobby for changes to the health system that will benefit consumers.

We'll treat this information confidentially unless you tell us in your letter that you're happy for us to communicate your experiences to help achieve change. Even then, your name and contact details will be kept confidential.

Write to *Health care experiences*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, fax us on (02) 9577 3377, or e-mail us on ausconsumer@choice.com.au

CHOICE is concerned that a proliferation of products that exclude certain procedures makes choosing a policy even more confusing. It may also be a further erosion of community rating (whereby you pay the same premium despite age or past medical history), and goes against the government's stated commitment to keep community rating intact.

If lots of policies exclude expensive procedures, the costs become shared by fewer, most likely older members, and premiums for this cover could rise.

The good news the changes bring is that funds will have to advise you in writing of rule changes affecting your coverage or benefits paid for medical procedures.

This is certainly an improvement on the previous situation, where changes could be made and members simply notified in their fund's newsletter, for example.

If you have a complaint regarding your health fund, contact the Private Health Insurance Complaints Commissioner on 1800 640 695.

Cot name confusion

Following our test report on cots in the October 1996 issue, Pamco Pty Ltd of Drummoyne, Sydney, has asked us to point out to our subscribers that it has no connection with the brand of cots that also bears the name 'Pamco'.

According to our records the distributor of Pamco cots is Australian Nursery Distributors, 70B Harley Crescent, Condell Park 2200; phone (02) 9791 0788.

New Consumer Credit Code

Do you use a credit card or deal with credit providers such as banks, building societies, finance companies and credit unions? If you do, the new Consumer Credit Code should make life easier.

It applies to all credit transactions from November 1, 1996.

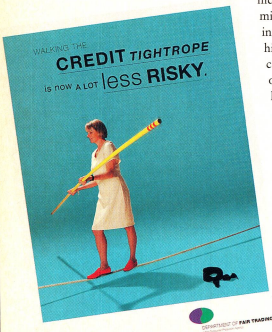
The Consumer Credit Code was introduced to address long-standing problems in the credit marketplace, such as

hidden fees, misleading information, high levels of commission, overcharging and heavy-handed debt collection practices.

There were also inconsistencies between states and between different types of credit.

The Code now requires credit providers to take a standard

approach wherever you live, and however you use credit.



The aim of the code is to make understanding and shopping for credit products better and fairer. In some cases it may take a little longer to get a loan, but you'll be in a much better position to assess the deals on offer.

■ Information about the loan, and the contract itself, must be presented in a comprehensible format.

■ Full information about the cost of the loan, including fees and charges, must be provided.

■ Your rights and obligations must be made clear — in the past, too many people took out credit without realising the implications if something went wrong.

■ Credit providers should be more flexible if you experience hardship (for example, lose your job).

Of course, even with the Code in place you still need to be alert to get the best deals:

■ Ask for the *comparison rate* when shopping around — credit providers should be able

to give you this. This rate probably won't be in the glossy ads, but it takes fees and charges into account as well as the interest rate.

■ Check whether your contract allows fees and charges to be varied after you've taken out the loan. If you think provisions in the contract allow unreasonable future rises, you might want to think again about going for that particular loan.

Shopping around for credit is also made easier by the Consumers' Association's own credit information service, MONEYCHOICES, which provides comparative information on home loans, personal loans, overdrafts and credit cards, and tells you which product is best for you. You can reach MONEYCHOICES on 1900 17 00 88.

If you'd like a copy of a brochure explaining your rights under the new Consumer Credit Code, call 1800 802 055.

Corrections

Electronic organisers

December 1996

In *Only my organiser understands me...* on page 37 we said you can "record messages and phone numbers (no addresses) in your own voice in phone directory, schedule/calendar and memo modes" with the IQ VOICE ORGANIZER.

This is not strictly correct. This organiser has no separate address prompt, but you can if you wish record addresses after the name in phone directory mode.

Cordless kettles

November 1996

The TIFFANY KT450 has dual water windows and should have received a tick in column 3 of the table on page 45.

Investing in retirement

CHOICE has been planning an article on investing in retirement for some months, with the aim of bringing it to you early this year. It's an important but complicated topic, and many people would like to understand more about the basics before consulting a financial adviser about their own situation.

However, the complex nature of the topic, plus the continual changes in regulation by governments, mean the subject doesn't lend itself well to a short CHOICE article.

We've therefore prepared a booklet on the subject which is available **free** to all subscribers. All you have to do is send an A4-sized, stamped, self-addressed envelope marked **Investing in retirement booklet** to our Consumer Information Service, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, and we'll send it out to you.

Shopping for a ladder can be a dangerous business — not even half the ladders on test could pass our stringent safety tests.



One step up?

IN BRIEF

Overall, only seven ladders out of 19 tested can be recommended. What to buy on page 8 tells you which ladders passed our safety tests and were given the highest rating by our user panel.

TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE SAFETY AND durability of ladders we turned our lab into a torture chamber, and for weeks the air was filled with the screams of bent treads, twisted stiles and stressed rivets.

Our victims: 1.8 m (or 6') metal step and step-extension ladders, as well as metal multipurpose ladders. We tested widely available ladders from major manufacturers and distributors.

The result: many step and step-extension ladders confessed they can't pass all our stringent safety tests (based on the Australian standard) and, sadly, none of the multipurpose ladders survived the torture completely unscathed.

Stepladders

Stepladders are the standard 'A-frame' models, and they're the most popular type of ladder for home use. For most indoor tasks, such as changing a light bulb or painting the ceiling, a 1.8 m stepladder will be all you need.

According to data from the National Injury Surveillance Unit, most ladder accidents don't occur because a ladder collapses but because people fall off them.

One way this can happen is when a ladder moves unexpectedly or 'walks'. You may have experienced a ladder 'walking' when you've been standing on it and shifted your weight from left to right. Ladders that aren't very rigid may move several centimetres and can make you lose your balance, while more rigid ones will hardly move at all.

The Australian standard includes a test that measures the 'walk' of a ladder — it's an important safety test. It was also the only test stepladders had problems complying with.

Only four models passed the 'walking test' both before and after a durability test designed to simulate the ladders' aging process. These are the only four stepladders we can recommend. All four had diagonal spreaders, which increase their rigidity.

Two models, the BAILEY Tradesman FS20023 and the OLDFIELDS Pro series PS6, only just passed the walking test *before* the durability test, and failed it afterwards. This indicates they may not continue to be safe ladders throughout their working lives. Both these ladders had parallel side spreaders, and were labelled as suitable for 'industrial' use and heavy loads.

Five stepladders in the test failed the walking test on day one — including the DAYTEK Step ladder, which has diagonal spreaders. However, the DAYTEK spreaders were much thinner and higher up than those on other ladders tested, which may be why they didn't provide the same rigidity.

So when you're shopping for a stepladder, check the rigidity and keep in mind that models with diagonal spreaders are more likely to be safer ladders. We think manufacturers should make them a standard design feature for all 1.8 m stepladders.

Step-extension ladders

A step-extension ladder gives you two ladders in one. It has hinges between its front and back legs which allow you to use the ladder in step mode or convert it into a straight extension ladder by swinging up the back legs and locking them into place with catches.

A step-extension ladder that's 1.8 m or 6' in step mode will give you about a 3.3 m or 11' straight ladder, which should be suitable for most indoor and outdoor tasks.

In stepladder mode, all the step-extension ladders were comparable to the best stepladders on test. Diagonal spreaders may not necessarily be required on step-extension ladders — the extra treads along the whole length of the ladder and strong hinges make them very rigid.

However, as a straight ladder, the OLDFIELDS TDP6 failed two tests and we can't recommend it.

In extension mode, both the BAILEY models tested have very sturdy catches, while the ones on the OLDFIELDS TDP6 and the WELBILT DP6 are much weaker and may not be safe enough in all situations.

Multipurpose ladders

Multipurpose ladders have three sets of hinges along their length that allow you to set them up in various ways — they can act as stepladders, extension ladders and can also be used in as many as a dozen other potentially useful modes (such as a stairwell scaffold or working platform).

But it seems the versatility of the multipurpose ladders tested is achieved by trading off ease of use and performance: none of the multipurpose ladders met all our requirements.

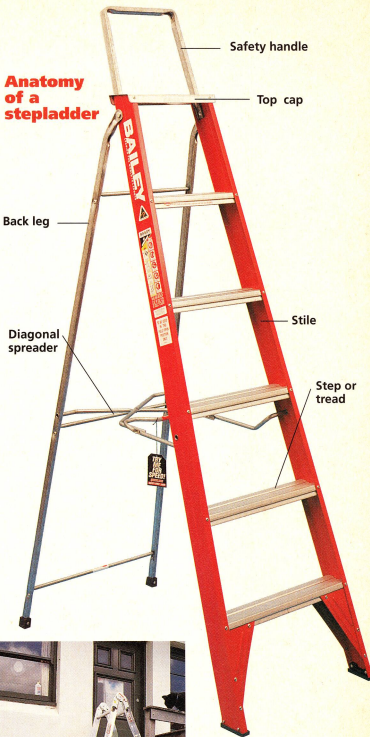
However, the OLDFIELDS TMP13 clearly stood out as the best of the bunch:

- Its performance in the test for 'permanent set' — which tells you about the tendency of the ladder to bend — was far superior to all the other multipurpose ladders in the test: it only failed marginally, while all the other models failed quite badly.

- It also would have passed the 'single joint lock test' (see *What we did* on page 8) if its manufacturer had rated it for 'domestic — 100 kg' rather than 'industrial — 120 kg' use.

All the multipurpose ladders were badly deformed during the single joint lock test and couldn't be used for any further testing.

Anatomy of a stepladder



Multipurpose ladders can be useful in certain situations, but even the best one on test isn't without shortcomings.

WHAT TO BUY

Stepladders

BAILEY Hercules 6' FS20176	BEST BUY	\$75
BAILEY Omega FS20124		\$120
WELBILT SL6 Industrial step		\$150

Step-extension ladders

BAILEY Comet 6' FS20256	BEST BUY	\$150
BAILEY FS20259		\$230

Multipurpose ladders — the best of those on test

OLDFIELDS TMP13	\$330
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Regarding availability, BAILEY and OLDFIELDS ladders are fairly easy to find. While WELBILT is one of the major brands in the ladder market, its models are only available in NSW, SA, Tasmania and Victoria.

However, you may find you have to order any of the models in the *What to buy* list through your local hardware shop or department store.

What we did

We tested the ladders according to selected clauses of the current and previous Australian standards. Tests included:

- Stile bending, shear and walking tests (all ladders).
- Permanent set, stile deflection and side-sway tests (step-extension and multipurpose ladders).
- Single joint lock test: This is an important though very severe safety test for multipurpose ladders in straight ladder mode. It requires a ladder not to collapse (but it can become deformed) under a weight of four times its load rating when one of the middle hinges is left unlocked. This is to ensure the hinges are strong enough to support a person even if the ladder is set up incorrectly.

While the Australian standard is a very good measure for the safety of a ladder and that our tests separate safe from less safe ladders. Therefore, models that didn't pass all our tests are 'not recommended', even though the standard isn't mandatory for manufacturers.

All tests were carried out on one sample ladder of each model in the following sequence: stepladder tests, step-extension tests (if applicable) and multipurpose ladder tests (if applicable).

After we initially checked the step and step-extension ladders against the standard, they were tested for durability (we couldn't test the multipurpose ladders for durability because they were all too damaged by the initial testing). If you use a ladder only occasionally around your house, it may well be a once-in-a-lifetime purchase. To simulate the aging of a ladder which may result in loosened rivets, for example, and less rigidity, we tested the ladders by applying a 130 kg load on a middle tread 1000 times, while the ladder was standing on uneven ground.

Finally, we repeated the walking test on all step and step-extension ladders to see whether their rigidity had decreased (see table note 8 on page 11). The recommended step and step-extension ladders still passed, so they should age well.

USING A LADDER SAFELY

Even a ladder that's got all the safety features we looked for and that's manufactured to the highest quality standards can't prevent you from having an accident if you don't use it properly.

DO

- Read the safety instructions or safety labels on the ladder.
- Inspect it for damage (such as cracks, bends or damage to the feet) each time you use it.
- Place it on a firm, dry and level surface.
- Make sure the spreaders and locking devices are firmly in place.
- When using an extension ladder, follow the 'one to four' rule: four measures up the wall should be matched by one measure away from the wall.
- Only lean an extension ladder against a strong, solid surface.
- Climb up and down facing the ladder.
- Unless you use a ladder especially designed for two people (for example a double stepladder) make sure only one person at a time climbs it.
- Keep your hips between the stiles of the ladder — don't lean out or sideways.
- Steel ladders may rust and wooden

ladders may rot when exposed to water, so store them in a dry, well ventilated place.

DON'T

- Don't use a folded stepladder leaning against a wall.
- Don't put the ladder in front of a door that may be opened inward.
- Don't reach too far forward or sideways.
- Don't stand on the ladder with only one foot.
- Don't use a metal ladder for electrical work or close to power lines (use a wooden or fibreglass ladder instead).
- Don't stand higher up a ladder than is recommended on its label.
- Don't paint your ladder, as this may hide cracks.
- Don't carry anything up a ladder that needs both your hands or that's heavy and could unbalance you.
- Don't use a ladder in high wind.
- Don't use step or step-extension ladders to form the supports of a scaffold.

CATCHES SNAPPED OPEN

When NSW CHOICE reader Paul Smith (name changed) wanted to do some work on the roof of his house, he used his step-extension ladder in extension mode for the first time. He read the safety instructions and followed them exactly: the ladder should extend at least 0.9 m above the support point, and Paul wasn't supposed to stand on the third rung from the top or above.

However, when he tried to climb onto the roof from the fourth-highest rung, he held on to the top of the ladder for support and to push himself off. This pressure on the top applied a force on the middle of the ladder and caused the catches to snap open and the ladder to collapse. Paul was lucky — he didn't fall to the ground but managed to dive onto the roof, still injuring his groin and his back.

When he called the ladder's manufacturer about the incident they were very sympathetic and helpful. They sent out a representative who took an accident report and promised to replace the ladder with another, better model. "I'd have been happy with that. My main concern was to alert the company to the safety problem. I really think this model should be taken off the market."

However, months and numerous phone calls later, Paul was still waiting for his new ladder. So he decided to take legal action to get a new ladder — and compensation.

PROFILES

Ladders profiled are ranked equal top performers within their group and are profiled in alphabetical order. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October 1996.

Stepladders

BAILEY Hercules 6' FS20176

Price: \$75

Good points

- Passed all our test requirements.
- Passed the walking test *after* durability testing.
- Has diagonal spreaders, which increase rigidity.
- Rated very good by our user panel.
- Has a safety handle.
- Inexpensive.

Bad points

- Relatively heavy.



BAILEY Omega FS20124

Price: \$120

Good points

- Passed all our test requirements.
- Passed the walking test *after* durability testing.
- Has diagonal spreaders, which increase rigidity.
- Rated very good by our user panel.

Bad points

- None to speak of.



WELBILT SL6

Price: \$150

Good points

- Passed all our test requirements.
- Passed the walking test *after* durability testing.
- Has diagonal spreaders, which increase rigidity.
- Rated very good by our user panel.
- Relatively lightweight.

Bad points

- None to speak of.



Step-extension ladders

BAILEY Comet 6' FS20256

Price: \$150

Good points

- Passed all our test requirements.
- Passed the walking test *after* durability testing.
- Strong catches for extension mode.
- Rated very good by our user panel.

Bad points

- None to speak of.



BAILEY FS20259

Price: \$230

Good points

- Passed all our test requirements.
- Passed the walking test *after* durability testing.
- Thick, heavy-duty construction.
- Strong catches for extension mode.
- Rated very good by our user panel.

Bad points

- Relatively heavy.
- Relatively expensive.



Multipurpose ladder

—the best of those we tested

OLDFIELDS TMP13

Price: \$330

Good points

- Failed only one stile strength test — and that only marginally.
- Would have passed the single joint lock test if it had been rated for 'domestic' use at 100 kg, but ...

Bad points

- ... Failed the single joint lock test relative to its labelled 'industrial' (120 kg) rating.



LADDERS

1 2 2

	Brand / model	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Warranty (years)	Target price* (\$)	Weight (kg)	Material	Purpose rating	Load rating (kg)
equal	STEPLADDERS (in rank order)								
	BAILEY Hercules 6' FS20176	Hills Industries	Australia	5	75	9.4	Steel	Domestic	100
	BAILEY Omega FS20124	Hills Industries	Australia	5	120	7.1	Aluminium (F)	Domestic	120
	WELBILT SL6 Industrial step	C Kennett	Australia	not stated	150	6.2	Aluminium	Industrial	120
	BAILEY Meteor FS20225 (A)	Hills Industries	Australia	5	110	5.8	Aluminium	Domestic	120
	Not recommended (in alphabetical order)								
	BAILEY Astron 6' FS20004 (B)	Hills Industries	Australia	5	100	5.8	Aluminium	Domestic	120
	BAILEY Tradesman FS20023	Hills Industries	Australia	not stated	170	6.4	Aluminium	Industrial	120
	DAYTEK 6' Step ladder	Dayton Tooling	Australia	not stated	70	8.1	Steel	Domestic	100
	OLDFIELDS Pro series PS6 (C)	Oldfields	Australia	'lifetime'	210	7.2	Aluminium	Industrial	150
equal	OLDFIELDS SM6 (C)	Oldfields	Australia	not stated	110	5.8	Aluminium	Industrial	120
	OLDFIELDS TS6 (C)	Oldfields	Australia	not stated	130	6.0	Aluminium	Industrial	120
	WELBILT PS6 Domestic step (D)	C Kennett	Australia	not stated	105	4.8	Aluminium	Domestic	110
	STEP-EXTENSION LADDERS (in rank order)								
	BAILEY Comet 6' FS20256	Hills Industries	Australia	5	150	8.2	Aluminium	Domestic	120
	BAILEY FS20259	Hills Industries	Australia	5	230	9.5	Aluminium	Industrial	150
	WELBILT DP6 Dual Purpose Step	C Kennett	Australia	not stated	170	7.5	Aluminium	Industrial	120
	Not recommended								
	OLDFIELDS TDP6 (C)	Oldfields	Australia	not stated	160	6.9	Aluminium	Industrial	120
	MULTIPURPOSE LADDERS — The best of those on test								
	OLDFIELDS TMP13 (C)	Oldfields	Australia	not stated	330	14.5	Aluminium	Industrial	120 (G)
	Not recommended (in alphabetical order)								
	HOMEMAKER (E)	K Mart	Taiwan	not stated	160	11.3	Aluminium	Domestic	100
	SILVER ORIENT Multi Purpose	Target	Taiwan	3	160	11.8	Aluminium	Domestic	140
	WELBILT Brenette AB4	C Kennett	Australia	not stated	440	15.9	Aluminium	Industrial	120

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October 1996.

- (A) To be discontinued in February.
 (B) Manufacturer claims there will be a modified version available early this year.
 (C) Manufacturer claims this ladder will be modified to meet the recently updated Australian standard.
 (D) According to the manufacturer, this model will be modified to ensure it passes the walking test.
 (E) According to the distributor, this model will be discontinued and replaced by a model

claimed to meet the new standard, but old stocks may be found in shops.

- (F) With steel stiles.
 (G) This ladder only passed the single joint lock test at 100 kg domestic rating.
 (H) Failed the walking test before durability tests.
 (I) Passed the walking test only marginally before durability tests.
 (K) See *Multipurpose ladders* on page 7 for details of why this ladder is the best of the multipurpose ladders on test.
 (L) Couldn't be tested for durability due to extensive damage during performance testing.

What to look for

Some weaknesses of step and step-extension ladders can only be revealed through tests in a lab. However, there's quite a lot you can do yourself in the shop to select a good ladder.

With all ladders

- Only buy a ladder you can unpack and try out in the shop.
- Look for a ladder labelled with safety instructions.

With stepladders

- Diagonal spreaders increase your chances of getting a safe stepladder — no matter whether the spreaders are ropes or metal.
- You may find a safety handle to be a very useful feature — particularly if you're uncomfortable using a ladder in the first place.

With step-extension ladders

- Look for catches that lock solidly into place in extension mode.
- In extension mode, climb the ladder up to the middle and make sure you feel comfortable on it and it doesn't bend too much under your weight.



On step-extension ladders, look for catches that lock solidly in place.

Multipurpose ladders

- Look for a ladder that has a similar stile depth to regular stepladders (around 8 cm).
- Look for hinges that lock securely, operate smoothly and have a visual indication they're locked.

	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Good safety labelling	Paint can hook	Tool slots	Safety handle	Diagonal spreaders	User panel score (%)	Passed all tests (before durability test)	Walking test (after durability test)
Brand / model							
STEPLADDERS (in rank order)							
✓		✓	✓	✓	80	✓	✓
✓				✓	80	✓	✓
✓				✓	80	✓	✓
✓				✓	60	✓	✓
Not recommended (in alphabetical order)							
✓			✓		80	x (H)	x
✓					80	✓ (J)	x
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	40	x (H)	x
✓	✓	✓			80	✓ (J)	x
✓					40	x (H)	x
✓	✓	✓			60	x (H)	x
✓					40	x (H)	x
STEP-EXTENSION LADDERS (in rank order)							
✓			na		80	✓	✓
✓			na		80	✓	✓
			na		60	✓	✓
Not recommended							
✓	✓	✓	na	✓	40	x	✓
MULTIPURPOSE LADDERS — The best of those on test							
✓			na		60	x (K)	(L)
Not recommended (in alphabetical order)							
✓			na		60	x	(L)
✓			na		20	x	
			na		40	x	(L)

1 Material

- Aluminium is light, relatively inexpensive and weather-tolerant.
- Steel ladders are generally cheaper but heavier than aluminium ones and may rust.
- Timber and fibreglass ladders weren't represented in this test as they're usually designed for industrial purposes, such as for electrical work.

2 Purpose rating/load rating

The Australian standard says ladders should have a permanent label stating their purpose and load rating.

Ladders rated for 'domestic' use should be able to be used for loads of at least 100 kg; those rated for 'industrial' purposes should be able to take loads of at least 120 kg.

The load rating column tells you the load the manufacturer actually claims for the ladder.

Due to the separate definitions for purpose and load in the standard, you can, for example, find both 'domestic' and 'industrial' ladders that carry a 120 kg load rating.

3 Tool slots

Models with a tick in this column offer slots

in the top of the ladder (in step mode) which can hold paintbrushes, screwdrivers or other tools.

4 Safety handle

Stepladders with a tick in this column have a handle you can hold onto — a safety feature that was very popular with our user panel.

5 Diagonal spreaders

Diagonal spreaders on stepladders seem to be an essential safety feature — only models with them passed all our tests. However, the spreaders on the Daytek, below left, were too high up to give enough rigidity.



6 User panel score

Four users assessed the ease of folding, unfolding, locking and unlocking the ladders. They searched for sharp edges and noted how safe they felt when climbing and standing on the ladders.

7 Passed all tests (before durability test)

A tick in this column means the ladder passed all our tests before the durability test, a cross indicates the model failed at least one requirement. See *What we did* on page 8 for details of testing.

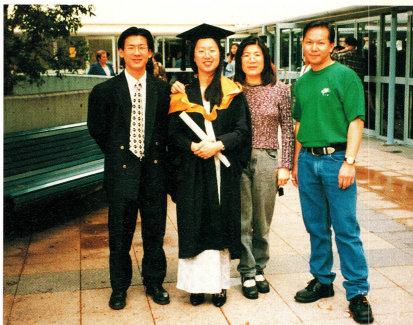
8 Walking test (after durability test)

A tick in this column means the ladder passed the walking test *after* the durability test (see *What we did*) and indicates that the ladder's design helps prevent it from losing its rigidity.

A cross indicates the ladder failed the walking test. Ladders failing this test are 'not recommended', even if they met all performance requirements before the durability test, because they may become less rigid — and therefore less safe — with age and use.

*Whether it be a car, holiday,
house, retirement or just a rainy
day, the list of possible savings
goals seems never-ending.
Saving for your children's
education is increasingly being
added to the list.*

Saving for education



AS AUSTRALIAN PARENTS you have some choice about how much you pay for your child's schooling. At the low end of the fees scale are state schools, whereas for parents considering private schools, secondary fees could be as high as \$10,000 per year. And tertiary education incurs fees and living costs too. So, unless you can be sure of a generous cash flow in future years, a longer-term savings strategy might be in order.

Some big financial institutions seem to think so. AMP recently released a software package telling you how much you will need to set aside, followed by instructions to call an AMP adviser. Likewise, Prudential's marketing for its savings plans has a strong educational emphasis.

In fact, most life insurance companies or fund managers will be happy to sell you a savings plan of some sort, though our advice is that this kind of scheme is unlikely to give you the best return on your money (see *How else can you save?*, opposite).

The Australian Scholarships Group

One scheme that is specifically designed for the purpose of saving for education is

run by the Australian Scholarships Group Friendly Society (ASG). What makes the ASG different from other education savings plans is that you only get the full benefits of the investment if your kids meet certain educational requirements.

Established in 1974, the ASG has over 220,000 members in Australia and over \$350 million under management. It offers two schemes, for secondary and tertiary education. The schemes are sold by 'counsellors' who receive commissions.

Both schemes require you to make regular contributions on behalf of your child over a number of years. The contributions are pooled into scholarship funds and the interest earned on those funds is made available if your children meet certain requirements (see right).

If your kids don't end up qualifying, the total contributions made are returned to you — without investment earnings.

The secondary scheme

The secondary scheme requires weekly payments of \$10 to \$40. These can begin as soon as your child is born until they turn seven, and are increased 8% each year until they reach secondary school.

The money is paid out over the six years of secondary schooling (five in some

states). Payments in the first three years are made from your total invested capital, but most of the money that is paid out in the fourth to sixth years comes from a pool of money called the bursary fund, which is made up of the members' investment earnings. The bursary fund can only be used for costs such as school fees or the reimbursement of educational expenses (the ASG will pay the fees direct; for other costs, receipts are needed), and a child must stay and complete the final year at school for the full amount to be paid out.

The value of the benefits will depend on the size of your contributions and your child's age when you enter the scheme, as well as the investment returns of the fund. In the example given by the ASG, the total amount paid out to someone enrolling a child before their first birthday, with starting contributions of \$25 a week, would be \$42,657. (Note that by the time your child is 11 your contributions will be over \$50 a week.) In contrast, the amount for someone who began contributions of \$10 when their child was six would be \$4765.

These projections assume that the fund's earnings will average 8% which, of course, is not guaranteed.

The tertiary scheme

The tertiary scheme works in a similar way, although the contributions for this scheme are set according to your child's age when you enter the scheme. Contributions start at \$5.32 a week if you enter your child at birth. As with the secondary scheme, they are increased 8% annually. Children can't be entered into the scheme after they turn 10.

The total contributions, without investment earnings, are returned to you when your child finishes secondary school or turns 18. For the above example (entering the scheme at birth), this amount would be \$9606. The investment earnings are pooled to form a scholarship fund which is paid to students over the course of a three-year full-time degree or diploma at a recognised university or college.

The ASG estimates that for parents who start their contributions when their child is one, the scholarship would total \$16,384. As with the secondary scheme, this assumes an investment return of 8%.

In both schemes, the fewer the students who qualify, the more money is paid to those who do.

The investment

The money is invested in a range of low-risk investments such as government bonds, cash, term deposits and first mortgages. The performance of the funds since 1991 has averaged just under 8%.

While these low-risk assets may not be able to outperform investments in, say, shares, over the longer term the ASG's earnings have the advantage of not being taxed. Under the Income Tax Assessment Act, friendly societies are tax-exempt if they are not carried on for the 'profit or gain' of their individual members. This makes the investment particularly attractive — 8% return untaxed is not bad — and accounts for the complex and conditional way in which the benefits are paid.

You also have to pay fees, some of which are refunded on maturity.

The risks

■ The biggest risk is that your children won't qualify for the benefits. Although you get back your total contributions even if your child doesn't qualify, you don't get the investment earnings. And the buying

How else can you save?

For those who don't feel they need the savings discipline or motivational aspects that are a part of the ASG scheme, there are plenty of other more flexible options.

Generally speaking, the longer you have to save, the more risky your investments can be. So if you had 10 years you might consider shares (or a higher-growth investment fund), though towards the end of that period it might be sensible to move the money to less volatile investments.

For a more comprehensive overview of investment options, see CHOICE, October 1996, *Where to invest \$5000 to \$10,000*.

power of the money you contributed will have been reduced by inflation.

Last year 43% of the ASG's students had actually stuck with the program for its duration to qualify for the tertiary benefits. This is well above the national average of people moving on to tertiary education, but it also illustrates the fact that some people will lose out. In fact, if everyone stuck with the scheme to the end, the payouts to each of them would be much lower.

■ You will also need to have some staying power. Indexed at 8% pa, the annual increase in contributions is considerably more than the current inflation rate, and over a period of 11 years would more than double your outgoings.

■ The amount of your contributions you get back if you drop out will depend on which year you do so. If you leave in the first two years, you'll get nothing; after that it depends on your child's age when you joined the scheme. However, your money is protected by an insurance plan should you die.

■ Finally, the tax position of the investment remains unclear. While the Commissioner of Taxation has advised in writing that fund earnings are tax-free, the income from the tertiary scholar-

ship fund is assessable for income tax.

As for the secondary school fund benefits, while the Tax Office has indicated informally to ASG that they are exempt, no formal ruling has been given.

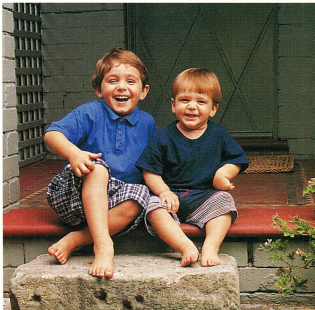
Naturally, any changes to the tax treatment of benefits — a major appeal of the investment — would have some impact on what you ultimately get back.

OUR VERDICT

While its tax status makes it attractive, the ASG doesn't promote itself simply as an investment, preferring to emphasise the motivational aspects of the scheme, which include membership certificates, a quarterly magazine, videos and careers advice aimed at getting children to stay in education.

But, quite clearly, judged simply as an investment, the ASG has some problems:

- It's very inflexible. You're committed to making regular contributions and you can't do what you like with the benefit.
- If your child doesn't qualify for benefits, and therefore you only get your contributions back, the return on your capital will be the same as if you'd left it under the bed. Your money will have effectively gone backwards. □



Start saving at this age with ASG for your kids' education — and you could lose out if you can't keep up the payments or your child doesn't qualify at the end.

TEST REPORT

*Summer, heat, thirst:
drink. We take a look at
a vast range of
commercial drinks —
what's in them and how
do they compare
nutritionally?*



Quenching that thirst

IN BRIEF

■ If you want to save money on summer drinks and aren't driven by fashion, go for a no-name fruit-based cordial.

■ As usual, 'natural' means nothing useful. A fruit flavouring can be called 'natural' if it's derived from fruit, but that doesn't give the drink any real fruit content.

■ Don't leave a baby nursing a bottle of fruit juice or soft drink — it's an invitation to tooth decay.

■ Fruit juice may be refreshing in summer, but nutritionally it's no substitute for real fruit — make sure you eat some too.

WHAT'LL IT BE? FRUIT JUICE, fruit drink, soft drink, cordial, 'diet' drink, sports drink or 'energiser'? Still or fizzy? Fruit-based or flavoured? Or just a dash of fruit or flavour?

In supermarkets, cafés, milk bars and takeaways you can choose from an ever-growing range of non-alcoholic drinks. In fact, the market for these drinks is worth \$500 million each year. Some (such as sports drinks) are marketed to active teenagers, others (such as herbal drinks) to health-conscious people, some fruit and soft drinks to young children and others to the hip and cool.

We've analysed a range of these newer drinks for sugar and fruit content and compared them to regular soft drinks, cordials, fruit drinks and fruit juice (see the table on page 19).

Some of the drinks we looked at contained some rather unusual ingredients (see *Herbs and potions* on page 17); most of the others, however, just featured the standard ingredients: water, sugar, flavours, preservatives, colours and sometimes fruit juice. But trendy packaging, feel-good slogans and slick advertising aim to make them look a whole lot more — often at a higher price.

On pages 17 and 18 we've profiled seven types of commercial drink: fruit juices, fruit drinks, soft drinks, cordials, flavoured mineral waters, diet drinks and sports drinks.

Specific food standards apply to most of these types. They say, for example, how much fruit a fruit drink must contain or when the term 'mineral water' can be used.

Fruit or flavour?

A major distinction between refreshing summer drinks is whether they contain fruit juice and, if so, how much. To call a product 'fruit drink', it has to have at least 5% fruit, but many of them have much more (25% and 35% are common).

Fortunately, the amount of fruit has to be stated on the label. So if you don't want a drink based solely on flavourings, read the label for fruit content — or check our table on page 19. Drinks that only contain fruit flavours, but not any fruit, must be clearly labelled — for example, orange-flavoured.

'Natural'

Don't be fooled by the term 'natural'. If a flavour is derived from fruit, it may be called 'natural', but it's still only a flavour and doesn't count as fruit content. Flavours can also be 'nature identical' which means they're man-made, but identical to a flavouring chemical found in nature. The word 'flavour' can also include artificial flavours.

A fruit by any name

While you're checking the label for the fruit content, also check the type of fruit and don't be taken

in by the name of the drink. The VIBE fruit drink we bought for our analysis contained 33% fruit juice and was called **Peach Mango Plus**, but first on the ingredient list (which means it's there in the biggest proportion) was pear.

While it's legal to use cheaper juices as a filler, CHOICE thinks a drink's name should give you an indication of the fruit you get most of. So in this case, pear should be part of the name. In fact, because it also contains carrot juice with its quite distinctive taste, 'Pear, Peach, Mango and Carrot' would be a much more truthful name for this drink.

Such naming questions are only one of the issues our food regulator (the Australia New Zealand Food Authority) is currently reviewing. We'll keep you posted on any changes as they come in.

Vitamin C

Juice and juice-based fruit drinks contribute to your vitamin C intake, but they're not an essential part of a healthy diet. An orange, a mango or a kiwi fruit, for example, can supply all the vitamin C you need in a day, and vitamin C is only one of the goodies found in fruit — dietary fibre is also important, and there may be other things we don't yet know about.

More than 100 studies have shown that eating plenty of fruit and vegetables decreases your chances of getting cancer. And a recently published study showed that eating fresh fruit every day was associated with a reduced number of deaths from heart disease and stroke over the period of the study. What scientists don't know is exactly what it is in fruit that wards off disease, so it may have benefits that juice and juice-based drinks can't match.

The vitamin C content of some fruits is listed below. As the table shows, some contain much more than others.

Fruit	Vitamin C (mg)
1 guava	270
1 cup pawpaw, diced	90
1 cup strawberries, whole	65
1 orange	63
1 kiwi fruit, peeled	57
1 cup rockmelon, diced	56
1 lemon	48
1 mango	41
1/2 grapefruit	37
1 peach	14
1 cup green grapes	10
1 apple	8
1 pear	5

The recommended dietary intake for vitamin C is 40 mg per day. That's how much you should con-

sume on average, over time. Don't worry if you get more than the recommended amount — vitamin C is water-soluble, so your body excretes what you don't need.

Sweet and juicy

Many of the drinks in our analysis contain relatively high amounts of sugar. The table on page 19 lists by sugar content the newer and more unusual drinks we looked at, as well as some common types of commercial drink.

Many of these drinks are also quite acidic — and both acids and sugars have the potential to cause dental problems.

When you drink sweet drinks (for example fruit juice, soft drinks or sports drinks), the bacteria present in your mouth can use the sugars in these drinks to produce more acid. The acid in turn can dissolve the tooth enamel, and if it breaks down you'll get dental decay — a cavity can develop.

Acidic drinks can be a problem because the acids can create an environment in your mouth where your tooth enamel can demineralise — you lose calcium and phosphate from your teeth. This is called dental erosion.

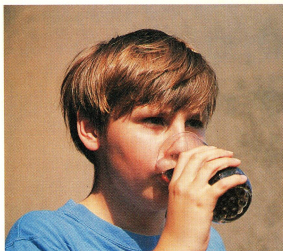
Minimising the damage

Not letting your children drink sweet acidic drinks (including artificially sweetened diet drinks, which are also often acidic) is of course one way to prevent their teeth from suffering damage, but given social and peer pressure, that's not always possible.

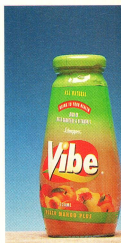
If you or your kids like sweet or acidic drinks, the best advice is to drink them quickly, rather than sipping them over a long period. That way your saliva has a chance to wash the drink off your teeth, rather than the sweet, acidic liquid spending a long time in your mouth.

Artificially sweet

'Diet' or 'low-joule' soft drinks won't necessarily help you lose weight. What's more important is to reduce the amount of fat you eat. Some research has shown that when we know we're eating an artificially sweetened food, we tend to compensate by eating more of other foods. It's worth watching out for this if you choose 'diet' drinks because you want to lose weight.



Sweet, acidic drinks can cause dental problems.



The label says "Drink to your health" — but fruit drinks don't have notable health benefits. While VIBE adds beta carotene (vitamin A), as well as vitamin C, it still misses out on the fibre and possibly other nutrients in fresh fruit. In CHOICE's view, VIBE sails very close to the wind in terms of making a health claim — something that's not allowed on food labels (see *Choosing foods* on page 30 for more information on health claims).

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Check the labels for fruit content in fruit drinks.
- Don't be swayed by claims such as 'contains real fruit' — check the fine print for an indication of the type of fruit and how much it contains.
- Check the ingredients label for additives (such as preservatives, artificial sweeteners, colours or flavours) you may want to avoid.



Don't be confused by the fruit juice content in cordials — what's stated on the label is for the concentrate, not the made-up drink. For example, if it claims 'contains 25% fruit juice', you'll in fact only get about one fifth of this in your made-up drink — 5%. A 40% cordial will give you around 8% fruit juice.

While artificially sweetened drinks don't contribute to dental decay, because of their acid content they can contribute to dental erosion (see *Minimising the damage*, above).

Drinks for young children

Babies shouldn't be given undiluted fruit drinks in their bottles — especially when they're not thirsty and won't drink it quickly. If they're sucking from their bottle more for comfort than thirst, the sugary, acidic liquid can stay in their mouth for some time.

This can lead to 'nursing-bottle caries' — dental decay at an early age caused by sugar and acids, especially in sweetened and unsweetened juices, cordials and soft drinks. It most commonly happens when children are frequently given bottles to comfort them when going to sleep. Milk also contains sugars, but it causes less decay because it's less acidic and also contains calcium that helps rebuild teeth.

At an early age too much fruit juice can also cause diarrhoea. This is especially a problem with apple and pear juices, which contain more fructose, a natural sugar that can be difficult to digest in large quantities. In extreme cases, when toddlers are given too much juice it can lead to stunted growth because they may not have enough milk and other foods and so get insufficient nutrients for growth.

Water is best to quench an infant's thirst. And if you can't get your child used to it, add only a dash of fruit juice for flavour.

CAFFEINE

Six of the 'new' drinks we looked at contain caffeine. This natural stimulant is mainly derived from coffee beans, cocoa seeds, tea leaves, cola nuts or guarana paste (prepared from the seeds of a climbing shrub).

Small amounts of caffeine probably do little harm to most healthy people. However, people respond differently to caffeine. How well you can tolerate it depends largely on how used to it your body is. If you regularly have drinks containing caffeine and you experience nervousness, irritability or an upset stomach, you may wish to try cutting down to see if your symptoms improve.

Typically, cola drinks contain caffeine, although you can find caffeine-free varieties on the market. In Australia, cola-type soft drinks to which caffeine has been added must be labelled 'contains caffeine' and can't have more than about 145 mg/L. COCA-COLA, for example, contains 90 mg/L caffeine, PEPSI-COLA 106 mg/L, STUFF Cola 110 mg/L and JOLT Cola the maximum level allowed — 145 mg/L.

Manufacturers aren't permitted to add caffeine to non-cola drinks. But there are some drinks on the market now that contain caffeine naturally, because they're based on tea or

What'll it cost?

The newer drinks on the market are generally dearer than traditional fruit drinks you can buy in bulk. But it seems it's the trendy advertising and fashionable image you pay more for — not the contents.

For example, you can't assume that the higher the price, the higher the fruit juice content. We paid \$2.47 for a six-pack of GOLDEN CIRCLE Pine Orange Fruit Drink with 50% fruit content. That works out to about 41 cents for 250 mL (a cup) — about two-thirds the price of a single FARMLAND Pop Up Orange, which contains only 5% fruit juice.

If you're not concerned about how much fruit juice is in a drink you can save even more, by taking the time to prepare a fruit drink at home from a fruit-based cordial. If you buy a no-name product that'll mix up to a drink with 5% fruit juice, around \$2.50 will buy you the equivalent of 10 L of fruit drink — that's only about six cents for 250 mL. For a branded cordial (for example, COTTEE'S Orange Fruit Juice Cordial) you can expect to pay about twice as much.

You can get the same amount of fruit juice in a ready-made drink, but it'll cost more than a cordial. The CLASSIC HITS Citrus Crush Orange Drink sells for about 68 cents for 500 mL. OASIS Kiwi Fruit & Lemon (one of the 'new' drinks, also in a 500 mL bottle) has the same fruit juice content (5%), but costs a fashionable \$1.44.

coffee. The FRUITOPIA Iced Tea Peaceable Peach we bought for our test contains 46 mg/L, KAFFÉ Espresso drink, 80 mg/L, LIPTONICE Sparkling Iced Tea Drink, 120 mg/L, and TWININGS Iced Tea Earl Grey, 150 mg/L.



Cola drinks usually have caffeine in them, but some newer drinks — often based on tea or coffee — now also contain it.



Fruit drinks

■ In the past there were two standards — one for fruit drinks (which generally had to contain at least 5% fruit juice) and one for fruit juice drinks (which mostly had to contain at least 35% fruit juice).

These two standards were merged in 1991; now there's only one standard for a fruit drink. It must contain at least 5% fruit (only 3.5% for passionfruit drinks). The 'fruit' can include fruit juice, fruit purée and orange peel extract (the liquid extracted from orange peel).

The fruit drinks we bought for our analysis contained either about 5% or between 25% and 50% fruit juice.

■ The label must tell you how much fruit the drink contains and what types of fruit have been used.

■ Vitamin C can only be added (and listed on the label) if the fruit content is at least 25%.

■ Sugar can be added. The drinks we bought contained between 6% and nearly 12%. The amount of sugar doesn't have to be listed on the label.

Herbs and potions

A few of the newer drinks contain some rather unusual ingredients, such as natural schizandra extract in **VIBE Peach Mango Plus**, ginseng, gotu kola, aloe and fo-ti in **CH'I Herbal Mineral Water Drink**, angelica root and echinacea in **VITRA Performance Drink**, and a yeast-bacteria mixture in **KOMBUCHA GOLD**.

Some of these ingredients are claimed to have beneficial effects on your health and well-being and are used in traditional Chinese medicine or other alternative medicines. Unless you specifically want to include these ingredients in your diet, it's probably not worth basing your purchasing decision on these ingredients alone.



Fruit Juice

■ **Fruit juice** is the liquid part of fruit (with or without pulp).

■ If a juice is claimed to be **freshly squeezed**, it must be juiced in front of you and can't contain any additives.

■ **Concentrated** fruit juice is fruit juice with some water removed.

■ **Reconstituted** juice is concentrated fruit juice which has had the water added back again.

■ Manufacturers only have to state that a fruit juice is **sweetened** if more than 2.5% of the drink is added sugar (or 4% if it's pineapple, lemon or lime juice).



Cordials

■ **Fruit cordial** contains fruit (generally fruit juice or orange peel extract). **Flavoured cordial** contains essences and may contain flavours.

■ Fruit cordial must be made up of at least 25% of the fruit it's named after (or only 15% in the case of lime, strawberry and passionfruit cordials).

■ Fruit cordial can't contain any orange peel extract if its name contains the word 'juice'.

■ The cordials we bought for analysis had around 5% to 10% sugar. 'Low-joule' or 'diet' cordials are artificially sweetened and normally contain no added sugar.

PACKAGING AND WASTE

■ If it's at all practical for you, buying drinks in large containers will save resources and reduce the amount of packaging used. And to minimise the waste that goes to landfill, choose containers that you can reuse or recycle.

■ Glass bottles and aluminium cans are easily recycled in most places around Australia.

■ Many plastic bottles are also recyclable. Look for the plastic identification code (PIC) on the bottom of the bottle or on the label — below left. For more information on PICs, see *The green page*, CHOICE, June 1996.

■ Check with your local council to see which types of plastic it offers recycling facilities for. Some supermarkets or service stations may also collect particular plastics for recycling.

■ Check whether your council provides collection facilities for other drink containers — for example Tetra Paks and Pure Paks. If it doesn't provide recycling facilities, ask for them — consumer demand may get your council moving. There are also drop-off facilities in major urban areas.



PET



HDPE

Some plastic identification codes (PICs).



Cardboard-based containers such as Tetra Paks and Pure Paks can be recycled, but it's not as easy to find somewhere to recycle them as it is for glass and some plastics.



Soft drinks

- A soft drink is generally made from water, sugar, flavourings and colourings. Caffeine is also added sometimes.
- The list of ingredients on the label mustn't imply that it contains fruit or fruit juice (unless it does, in which case it's classed as a fizzy fruit drink, not a soft drink).
- Soft drinks in general contain around 11% sugar — that's around 10 teaspoons of sugar in a 375 mL can. 'Low-joule' or 'diet' soft drinks are artificially sweetened and contain no added sugar.



Flavoured mineral waters

- There is no specific standard for mineral water that contains fruit juice or is flavoured. However:
- The water used must be mineral water — it must come from underground and, in its natural state, must contain dissolved minerals.
 - If the label says it contains fruit juice, it must meet all the fruit content and labelling requirements for a fruit drink.
 - If it's just 'flavoured' rather than containing fruit juice, it's basically the same as a soft drink.
 - On average, mineral water with citrus juice contains around 11% sugar — or around 10 teaspoons of sugar per 375 mL can. The sugar content doesn't have to be given on the label.



Sports drinks

Sports drinks are designed to provide fluid to prevent dehydration and easy-to-consume carbohydrate to replace lost energy during and after exercise.

The increasingly popular 'new-generation' isotonic sports drinks (such as **GATORADE** and **POWERADE**) aren't as high in sugar as soft drinks — they contain 6% to 8% on average. So if you're switching from a traditional soft drink to a sports drink, you'll be reducing your sugar intake — regular fruit and soft drinks contain around 11% sugar.

However, you'd need to be exercising for long periods to reap any other benefits from sports drinks, unless they encourage you to drink fluids that you otherwise wouldn't. If you just exercise a few times a week for an hour or so at a time, tap water is all you need to replace lost fluids — and you'll save a lot of money.

For more information on sports drinks, see **CHOICE**, March 1995.



Diet drinks

A number of artificial sweeteners are permitted for use in low-joule drinks in Australia (the number in brackets is the food additive number): acesulfame-K (950), alitame (956), aspartame (951), cyclamate (952), saccharin (954), sucralose (955) and thaumatin (957). There's a maximum amount that can be added for all of them except thaumatin.

As far as the safety of artificial sweeteners is concerned, the scientific evidence about possible adverse effects of some of the sweeteners is conflicting (see **CHOICE**, May 1994, for details). Using them in moderation shouldn't harm your health.

- Diet drinks have to be labelled 'artificially sweetened'. The label must say which artificial sweetener(s) have been used or list their additive number(s), and it must state any added sugars or related products.



Some of the new summer drinks listed in the table, right.

SUMMER DRINKS

We purchased all new or unusual summer drinks we could find in supermarkets and small food stores. Wherever possible we assessed the orange flavour and compared them to regular soft drinks, fruit drinks, cordials and fruit juice. The nutritional information in this table comes from a combination of sources: labels, manufacturers' information, laboratory analysis and Australian food composition tables.

Brand / product (ordered by sugar content, lowest to highest)	Manufacturer / distributor	Sugar content (%)**	Teaspoons of sugar per 250 mL**	Fruit content (%)	Artificial sweeteners	Caffeine
Diet or low-joule cordial, flavour-based, made up		0	0	0	✓	
Diet or low-joule flavoured soft drinks (A)		0	0	0	✓	(K)
AQUA PURA with a Dash Lime and Lemon	Great Waters of Australia	0	0	0		
BICKFORD'S Pure Water with a Twist of Lemon	Lloyd Products	0	0	0		
SPRITZ 2 Cal Lemon	Lloyd Products	0	0	0	✓	
Diet or low-joule cordial, fruit-based, made up		0	0	5 (minimum) (H)	✓	
Diet or low-joule fizzy fruit drinks (B)		0	0	5 (minimum) (H)	✓	
TRIM LIFE Lemon, Lime & Bitters Flavour	Aussie Bodies	Trace	0	1 (lemon)	✓	
ALOE VERA PLUS Tangerine Family Fruit Drink	Aloe Plus U	2.5	1.5	5 (orange, mandarin)		
GROWLING DOG Wild Berry Flavour	Musashi	4.7	3	0		
KOMBUCHA GOLD	The Valley-Kombucha Gold	4.7	3	0		
HARTZ Tasmanian Mineral Water Orange Grove	Hartz Tasmania	6	3.75	0		
FRENZO Chamomile and Lime Flower	Golden Circle	6	3.75	25 (pear)		
Sports drinks, isotonic (C)		6 to 8	3.75 to 5	0		
VITRA Performance Drink	Vitra	6.7	4.25	0		
TWININGS Iced Tea Earl Grey	Socomin International Fine Foods	6.7	4.25	5 (lemon)		✓
FRUTTE Mandarin	Berrivale Orchards	7	4.5	0		
ESPRIT Orange Tangerine	Lloyd Products	7.2	4.5	5 (J)		
Orange juice, commercial, no added sugar		7.4	4.5	100		
KAFFÉ Espresso	Southern Beverage	8	5	Trace	✓	✓
FRUITOPIA Iced Tea Peaceable Peach	Coca-Cola Amatil	8.1	5	0	✓	✓
LIPTONICE Sparkling Iced Lemon Tea Drink	Unifoods	8.1	5	1.4		✓
CH'I Herbal Mineral Water Drink	Ch'i International	8.8	5.5	0		
VIBE Peach Mango Plus	Schwepes Cotte's	8.9	5.5	33 (pear, mango, peach, carrot)		
Orange juice, commercial (D)		9	5.75	100		
Cordial, flavour-based, made up		9.6	6	0		
Cordial, fruit-based, made up		9.6	6	5 (minimum) (H)		
Fruit drinks (E)		10	6.25	5 (minimum) (H)		
FRUITOPIA Strawberry Passion	Coca-Cola Amatil	10	6.25	10 (apple, passionfruit, strawberry)		
SNAPPLE Lemonade	Snapple Beverages	10	6.25	14 (lemon)		
OASIS Kiwi and Lemon Fruit Drink	Cadbury Schwepes	10.1	6.25	5 (lemon, kiwi)		
OCEAN SPRAY Pink Grapefruit	Effem Foods	10.2	6.5	50 (grapefruit)		
STUFF With Guarana	Stuff Bottlers	10.8	6.75	0		✓
Fizzy fruit drinks or mineral waters with fruit juice (F)		10.9	6.75	5 (minimum) (H)		
Soft drinks (flavoured) (G)		10.9	6.75	0		(K)
BARR Iri-Bru	Three Way Holdings	11	7	0		
SPRING VALLEY Fruit Punch Lemon	Spring Valley Beverages	11.1	7	25 (lemon, apple, grapefruit)		
KINNIE	Buhagiar Food Distributors	11.3	7	(J)		
JOLT Cola	Jolt Australia	11.5	7.25	0		✓
INNER LIFE Springwater with Evening Primrose Oil, Ginseng and Aloe Vera, Mandarin & Orange Flavour	The Health Conscious Food Company	11.9	7.5	5.3 (grape)		
TANG Orange Flavoured Vitamin C Supplement	Cotte's Foods	12.3	7.75	0		

** The percentage is based on grams per 100 mL.

*** Calculated on the number of 4 g teaspoons of sugar in 250 mL of drink, rounded to the nearest 1/4 of a teaspoon. Many of these drinks come in sizes different from 250 mL, but 250 mL is used as a typical drink serving for comparison purposes.

(A) For example, Diet Coke or Pepsi Diet.

(B) For example, Diet Solo.

(C) For example, Gatorade or Powerade.

(D) Up to 2.5% of the sugar in orange juice not labelled 'no added sugar' can be added. Manufacturers say this is to allow for seasonal variations in sweetness of oranges.

(E) This category includes all drinks that contain at least 5% fruit juice — for example, Golden Circle Fruit Drink (50% fruit juice), Berri Fruits (35% fruit), various 'no-name' brands' fruit drinks with 25% fruit juice or fruit drinks made up from fruit drink concentrates.

(F) For example, Deep Spring Lemon Fruit Drink (with 5% lemon juice), Solo Lemon Crush (with 5% crushed whole lemon) or Schwepes Natural Mineral Water (with 5% Orange & Mango).

(G) For example, Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola, Fanta, Schwepes Dry Ginger Ale, Schwepes Lemonade.

(H) Fruit drinks must contain at least 5% fruit juice. However, many of these drinks contain much more than the minimum prescribed. The most common fruit juice concentrations in drinks are 25% and 35%. Look for the fruit juice content on the label; manufacturers must declare it.

(J) Information on fruit content or type of fruit is not available.

(K) Cola-type soft drinks generally contain caffeine.

Surrounded by sound

It's fairly new, it sounds exciting and it's very confusing — it's home theatre. We tell you what it's all about, what equipment you need and what the future will bring.

THIS ARTICLE WILL TELL YOU:

- What more you get from home theatre than from your stereo system and TV alone (page 20).
- What components you need for home theatre (pages 20 to 21).
- What the difference is between the various 'surround-sound' systems and what changes there will be in the near future (pages 22 to 23).
- A guide to buying a home theatre system step-by-step (page 24).

IF YOU GO TO THE MOVIES TO SEE A modern action film, it's not just the large screen that makes it an experience — it's the sound effects as well: the earth-shaking bass of a *Tyrannosaurus rex* thumping through the forest, or the scream of a fighter jet as it passes over your head and disappears in the distance.

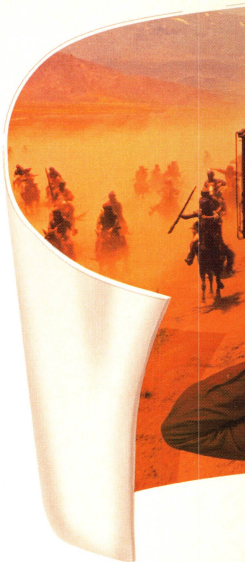
The same giant sound lurks within your own TV and even your VCR. All you need is the right equipment and you'll be ready for home theatre (see *Surround-sound components*, right).

Stereo and home theatre: what's the difference?

Most people will have experienced stereo sound effects: for example, the violins of an orchestral recording coming from the left speaker and the horns from the right. Stereo recordings provide sound information on two separate tracks. Your stereo system is able to read this information and to amplify it separately — one 'channel' to each speaker.

Recordings for home theatre (or 'surround sound') carry coded information for four, five or even six channels. A conventional stereo system isn't able to decode all that sound information.

So most importantly for home theatre, you'll need a special decoder that can retrieve the sound information from a surround-sound recording and amplify the information through four or more separate channels. And you'll need additional speakers, to which all that separate sound information can be sent.



Surround-sound

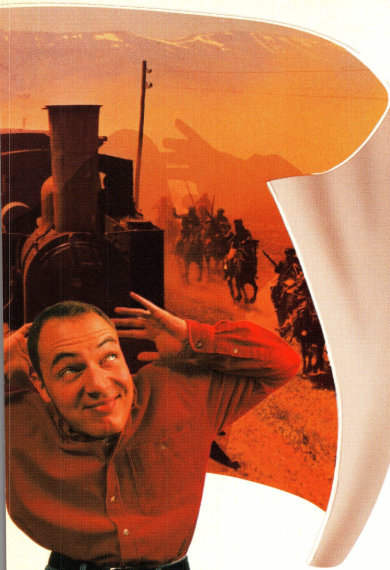
Whether you buy a complete surround-sound system or upgrade your existing equipment, the following components are part of a full home theatre. For price information see *What will it cost you?* on page 24.

Decoder

The brain of your home theatre is the surround-sound decoder that reads the surround-sound signals from a video tape, TV broadcast or some other source, amplifies them separately for each channel and distributes them to the appropriate speakers. You have the choice of buying a:

■ **Standalone decoder:** These have amplifiers for the centre and rear channels. You use them together with your existing hi-fi amplifier or receiver (that's an amplifier with a built-in radio tuner), which amplifies the front speaker channels.

■ **Decoder / amplifier:** This is a decoder with amplifiers for all channels.



components

- **Decoder / receiver:** As well as decoding and amplifying all channels, surround-sound receivers have an additional radio tuner. They're by far the most popular choice of decoder.
- **Decoder / TV:** You can also get TV sets with a built-in surround-sound decoder. However, they're not widely available and very few people choose this option.

Program sources

Most modern movies broadcast on TV carry surround-sound coded signals. However, if you want to get full use out of your home theatre system you'll need to be able to view programs from other sources too. For that you'll need at least one of the following components in addition to your TV set:

- **Hifi stereo VCR:** You need a stereo model through which the decoder can access the stereo soundtrack on videos.
- **Laser disc player:** Laser discs are another source for movies and are of higher quality than video tapes. The video part of laser discs is usually recorded in analogue mode, the sound digitally. Laser discs are available from a small number of shops, mainly in major cities. Some of these may offer a mail-order

service; otherwise you'll have to mail-order them from the US.

- **CD player:** You can also buy music CDs that are coded for surround sound. And with some decoders you can create different effects with music even on normal CDs (see *Music modes* on page 23).

Speakers

If you use a powerful amplifier, make sure all your speakers meet its specifications — the speakers and amplifier should have the same impedance (ability to resist electric current, measured in ohms).

For information on buying a speaker 'package', see *What will it cost you?*, on page 24. The speakers you'll need for home theatre are:

- **Front speakers:** They provide the stereo effects and the film music. If you already own a good pair of speakers, you can use them. To achieve a good stereo effect, the front speakers and the listener should form an equilateral triangle. Ideally you should sit six to eight times the screen width away from the TV, and the speakers should be placed about three to four times the screen width to either side of the TV.
- **Centre speaker:** Its main task is to connect the picture with the picture-related sound. For example, it carries the dialogue of a movie because it would be irritating if you heard the actors' voices from the left or the right.

Its characteristics (such as the frequency range) should be closely matched to the front speakers because they often support each other (for example, if a car drives across the TV screen, it should sound the same as the signal is passed from the left to the centre and then to the right speaker).

As the centre speaker will be placed directly above or below your TV, it should be magnetically shielded. Otherwise its magnets can interfere with the colours of your TV picture.

- **Rear effect or surround speakers:** They handle ambient sound like applause, traffic noises or other special sound effects. The rear speakers should be positioned at ear height and level with or behind you. They should create a diffuse 'wall' of sound rather than enable you to pinpoint its direction.

If you use a Dolby Pro-Logic system the rear speakers don't have to be of the same high quality as the front speakers. The more advanced systems like THX or Dolby AC-3, on the other hand, require higher-quality rear speakers. See *Surround-sound systems* on pages 22 to 23 for details.

- **Subwoofer:** This is an optional speaker for very low bass frequencies — for example the stomping of a dinosaur. It doesn't matter where you put it, as the human ear can't locate exactly where very low frequencies are coming from.

Picture

Without an adequately sized picture, you probably won't get a proper movie theatre feeling:

- **TV:** Your TV should have at least a 48 cm screen — larger for the full effects. See page 26 for a test report on 68 cm stereo TVs.
- **Projector:** A video projector and a 2.5 m screen can bring you one step closer to a movie screen.

Do you have the space?

A complete home theatre system with up to six speakers can take up a fair bit of real estate in a room. And ideally it requires a bit of distance from neighbours as well: to get the real movie theatre feeling, you'll need a good, thumping bass and a generous power output. However, if your Top Gun fighter jets scream through your neighbour's living room as well, he might turn into the Terminator of your home theatre dreams ...

Get expert advice

As *What will it cost you?* (page 24) shows, a good home theatre system will cost a fair bit of money, and what sounds great in a shop can sound quite different in your home. Take the following steps when you go shopping:

- Tell the salesperson the size of the room you want to put your home theatre system in and whether you already have components you want to be part of the system. They should be able to match components to your existing ones and to your room.
- Make sure the shop has an audition room where you can try out different packages. You may even be able to bring in your existing components and hook them up as part of the systems you listen to.
- Get advice about the — quite substantial — wiring and the positioning of the speakers. Reflections and interference of sound waves due to speakers that are in the wrong position can lead to a disappointing result.
- Ask whether you can exchange components if you're disappointed with their sound in your home or in combination with existing equipment.

Digital Video Disc — DVD

Digital Video Disc or Digital Versatile Disc (what DVD stands for depends on the manufacturer) is a system that was announced about a year ago but that's still not on the market. It'll provide full-length, digitally recorded movies on a disc the size of a music CD. You'll need a special DVD player to be able to play back the discs (and it'll play normal music CDs and computer CD-ROMs as well).

DVD is supposed to be a major source of programs for the Dolby AC-3 home theatre system (see right). While the main technical problems seem to be resolved, the film studios are still fighting about the pricing, packaging, protection from pirates and — a major issue — the protection of release dates.

For example, Hollywood movies are available on video (or will be on DVD) in the US before other countries even get them in cinemas. The studios fear that people overseas will mail-order the high-quality DVDs for their home theatre as soon as they're available in the US — and that cinema revenues from those countries will drop.

DVD is supposed to be released overseas in early 1997 — there's no date for Australia yet. Even if the system finally comes onto the market, it'll probably take years until it grows to a similar prominence to videos today.

A laser disc is about the size of an LP record — here you see one compared with a CD. At present laser discs are hard to buy in Australia — most need to be mail-ordered from the US.



Surround-sound

Surround sound isn't just surround sound. If you think the components sound complicated, the different systems and what they can do are even more so. If you just want a surround-sound system that's up-to-date and has plenty of material available for viewing on it, at present buy a **Dolby Pro-Logic** system and forget the rest of this section.

■ **Dolby Pro-Logic** is currently the most common home theatre system. It's been used in movies for years and records analogue signals for four channels (front right, front left, centre and rear speakers) on just two tracks.

The decoder separates the signals again and sends them to the appropriate speakers of your system. This mixing and then separating of the channels results in a slight loss of sound quality.

Both rear speakers get the same mono signal, which has a reduced frequency range (no low bass and very little high frequency). So they don't necessarily have to be of the same quality as the front speakers.

Most recent movies broadcast on TV are Pro-Logic coded for surround sound. Dolby Pro-Logic has also been on most rental videos from major film studios since the beginning of the '90s — look for the logo 'Dolby surround' in a video shop.

However, not all surround-sound coded videos can be identified that way: some studios don't use the logo, or at least not all the time.

Another source for Dolby Pro-Logic movies is laser discs (see *Surround-sound components* on page 21). There are thousands of movies available, but most of them have to be mail-ordered from the US. The Australian market is very small.

■ **Dolby AC-3 or Dolby digital** is an advanced — and still very expensive — system, which digitally records the signals for six channels (front right, front left, centre, rear right, rear left, subwoofer) on six separate tracks. So the decoder doesn't have to separate the signals and there's no loss of quality.

With Dolby AC-3, the rear speakers have to be stereo. They receive a signal that's more powerful than with Dolby Pro-Logic, and that doesn't have a limited frequency range (it contains low to high frequencies). So the rear speakers have to be of higher quality than with Pro-Logic.

Currently, programs for Dolby AC-3 are only available on laser discs; since about the beginning of 1996 most new movies released on laser disc are Dolby AC-3 coded (they still carry the Pro-Logic coding as well, so they can also be used on Pro-Logic systems). Dolby digital

systems

won't be available for videos but the digital video disc is supposed to become a major source of movies for it (see *Digital video disc*, left).

■ **THX** uses the same source material as Pro-Logic or AC-3 but requires a special decoder.

It decodes the surround-sound information identically to them, but a THX decoder then modifies the signals to the speakers — particularly to the rear speakers. To get the THX tag, all speakers have to meet certain quality standards. So THX is supposed to guarantee high quality — but for a price (see *What will it cost you?* on page 24).

■ Some stereo systems carry labels like '3D surround' or '3-Channel-Logic'. They simulate a three-dimensional sound that's not proper surround sound. This '3D sound' can also be a feature of your home theatre decoder.

Buying tips

So is it worth investing now in the more affordable Dolby Pro-Logic, or will the system be out of date in a few years' time? Should you instead wait for the price of Dolby AC-3 to drop or for digital video discs to establish themselves?

Even if DVD finally reaches the Australian market, it'll take several years until it's in a position as strong as videos are today. And it seems likely that both sources will exist alongside each other.

If you want the home theatre experience now, Pro-Logic is the way to go unless money is no object. If you think you might want to upgrade to Dolby AC-3 later, choose good-quality speakers that you can use for AC-3 as well. That way you'll only have to replace the decoder (and possibly buy a DVD player).

Pro-Logic receivers are available that can be upgraded to AC-3 with an adaptor unit, but they're expensive.

Pro-logic modes and effects

In addition to Pro-Logic mode, your Pro-Logic decoder generally offers a range of special effects and other sound modes that make best use of your speaker set-up or allow you to do without certain speakers if you can't afford to buy a complete system all at once (see *Home theatre — step by step* on page 24).

■ Centre channel modes

■ **Normal:** The centre speaker will sit directly on or below your TV, so you may want one that's as compact as possible — for example, a speaker without a woofer (bass speaker element). In that case, you should use the 'normal' mode, which sends low frequencies from the centre channel to the right and left main speakers.



— **Wide:** If your centre speaker has a woofer, use the 'wide' mode, which will send all frequencies from the centre channel, including the bass, to the centre speaker.

— **Phantom:** If you don't have a centre speaker (yet), the 'phantom' mode will split the signal from the centre channel and send it to the front speakers. However, the connection between dialogue and picture won't be ideal in this mode — you may hear the actors talk slightly from the left or the right.

■ Simulated surround-sound

If you don't have rear speakers (yet), the Pro-Logic receiver or amp can send the signal from the rear channel to the front and centre speakers. While this can sound 'three-dimensional', it's not real surround sound. '3D surround' or '3-Channel-Logic' systems (the name depends on the manufacturer) can give you a similar effect.

■ Music modes

— **Stereo:** You can buy surround-sound coded music CDs as well. However, if you just want to listen to stereo music, you can use the front speakers on their own.

— **Effects:** Pro-Logic receivers or amplifiers usually have programs that try to simulate the specific sounds of music in different locations — for example in a jazz club, opera house, church or stadium. These acoustic effects work with every normal recording and are generated by the receiver or amplifier.

Sound waves from any source reach your left and right ears with a slight difference in time and volume. Your brain uses these differences and the mixture of direct and reflected sound waves to calculate the direction of the source as well as the size and acoustics of the room you and the source are in. The decoders are designed to take advantage of this principle, simulate time and volume differences and trick your brain.

Dolby Pro-Logic is the most common surround-sound system, and there are plenty of videos and broadcasts available for viewing with it. Other systems are much more expensive and currently have few programs available to watch on them.

Home theatre — step by step

If you can't afford a full home theatre system in one go, you could use your existing TV and hi-fi speakers and just invest in a decoder and a centre speaker (see photo below). Add the rear speakers and other components later.



For a complete home theatre set-up, you'll need the following components:

- A decoder (standalone or as part of an amplifier or receiver).
- A TV or projector and screen.
- A pair of stereo front speakers.
- A centre speaker.
- A pair of rear or 'surround' speakers.
- A subwoofer (optional).
- Components that can replay source material carrying the surround-sound code (for example a hi-fi stereo VCR or a laser disc player).

Some manufacturers offer Pro-Logic mini or midi stereo systems (five speakers, decoder, cassette and CD players) or home theatre speaker packages (see *What will it cost you?*, below, for details). This can be an advantage, as the speakers of a surround-sound system should be matched as closely as possible. But with the advice of your audio retailer you can put together custom-made packages as well — especially if you want to use speakers and other components you already have.

The sheer number of components and the amount of money you'll have to spend on a complete home theatre system could easily put you off. However, you don't have to buy everything at once. You can start with the basic components (some of which

you may own already — for example, a large-screen TV and a pair of hi-fi speakers), and upgrade the system step by step.

Start with the basics ...

If you just want to improve the experience of TV broadcasts, you need a decoder, a TV with a 48 cm screen or larger, and a pair of front speakers, plus:

■ **A centre speaker:** With a centre speaker but no rear speakers you'd need to use the 3D surround or 3-Channel-Logic mode of your decoder, which simulates a three-dimensional sound effect. It's not real home theatre but will still make for more interesting watching and listening than a normal TV.

Or:

■ **A pair of rear speakers:** With rear speakers and no centre speaker you need to use the 'phantom' mode on your decoder (see *Pro-Logic modes and effects*, page 23).

... and add on later

■ Complete your system with the speakers still missing: rear or centre speakers, respectively, and finally a subwoofer.

■ If you want access to source material other than what's broadcast on TV, you can add components like a hi-fi stereo VCR or a laser disc player.

■ A larger TV or even a projector and screen at some stage will match the picture experience with the sound.

It may be a good idea to put together a complete system in your audio shop and buy the components as you can afford them. That way you know how the complete system will finally sound.

However, if you wait too long to complete your system, a speaker series might be discontinued and you'd have to try to find matching models. □

What will it cost you?

See *Surround-sound systems* for more information on the various systems referred to below, and *Surround-sound components* for an explanation of what the different components do.

■ **Decoder / receiver:** Dolby Pro-Logic receivers cost from \$400 and are the most popular choice of decoder. Prices for THX models and receivers that are adaptable to Dolby AC-3 start from \$2000 (plus \$500 for the adaptor unit). AC-3 receivers currently start from \$3500.

■ **Standalone decoder:** Standalone Pro-Logic decoders cost from around \$500 but aren't widely available.

■ **Decoder / amplifier:** Prices for Pro-Logic models start from \$700 but they aren't widely available.

■ **Surround TV:** TVs with a built-in decoder start from about \$2600, but they aren't widely available.

■ **Hi-fi stereo VCR:** From around \$600 — we'll be publishing a test of some hi-fi stereo models in an upcoming issue of CHOICE.

■ **Laser disc player:** Laser disc players cost from \$1000 and can play normal music CDs as well. Laser discs are available from a small number of shops, mainly in major cities (some of which may offer a mail-order

service; otherwise you'll have to mail-order them from the US. They cost around \$60 to \$80.

■ **Large-screen TV:** TVs with 68 cm screens cost from \$1100. See page 26 for a test of 10 models.

■ **Projector and screen:** projectors cost from around \$3000, a 1.5 m screen from \$600.

Packages

■ A package of reasonable quality with front, centre and rear speakers from a department store or a specialised audio retailer can start from as low as \$800. However, for higher-quality speakers there's not really an upper limit. For example, AC-3 speaker packages start from around \$2000, while you'll have to pay in excess of \$6000 for a THX package.

■ If you don't want to buy the more expensive single components, some manufacturers offer surround-sound mini and midi stereo systems. These usually include a Pro-Logic receiver, a cassette player, a CD player and five speakers. Mini systems start from around \$700, midi systems from about \$1000.

■ 3D surround/3-Channel-Logic systems don't have a Pro-Logic decoder and therefore can't give you true surround sound. They come without rear speakers; mini systems start from around \$500.



Dangerous cots

I have just finished reading your article *How safe are children's cots?* in the October 1996 issue. I find it highly distressing that although a number of children have died because of dangerous cots, manufacturers still refuse to make cots safer.

My son died from strangulation in 1993, after his jumper got caught on a protruding bolt on his cot. Regarding the comment made by Jerry Moller [author of a National Injury Surveillance Unit report on cot injuries] in your article about product liability, after my son's death I was told the manufacturer of his cot no longer existed, so there was no point trying to bring a product liability action. Maybe someone should take cot manufacturers to court to get the point across that substandard cots are unacceptable.

It is unfortunate that children have to die before something is done about safety. Our government is very slack in this department. Australia should follow the US lead and make safety standards mandatory.

**Name withheld
South Australia**

We agree. For years now we've been campaigning to make cots safe for our children, yet major rectifiable safety faults continue to be found. In the past 12 years we've tested cots four times, and on each occasion were appalled by the results:

- In 1985, 16 out of 24 cots had major safety faults.
- In 1989, 10 out of 16 cots had major safety faults.
- In 1991, 15 out of 19 cots had major safety faults.
- In 1996, nine out of 10 cots had major safety faults.

Over this time, we have spent a lot of time with manufacturers trying to help them get their products right. Yet most continue to fail basic safety tests and there continue to be serious injuries and avoidable deaths.

The only way to stop this happening is to:

- Make the current voluntary standard for cots mandatory.
- Conduct a review, involving community participation, about which other product safety standards should be made mandatory.
- Initiate the development of a Product Safety Law — a general legal safeguard that exists in many other countries. Currently, it is

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help us greatly in our research. We'd also like to hear your experiences using CHOICE to buy a product or service: did it save you money, time or disappointment?

To say thanks for writing to us, each *Your Letters* will award a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, the parent who wrote to us from South Australia, receives *Put it in writing*.

Unfortunately we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally. We also reserve the right to cut parts of longer letters for publication. See page 2 for how to reach us by mail, fax or e-mail.

not an offence in Australia to knowingly manufacture — or not to recall — an unsafe product.

Custom-made cot mattresses

I recently purchased a cot mattress which I later found to be too big for our cot. On returning it to the shop, I was informed that I would need to get one custom-made from a foam supplier, but it would probably be more expensive.

I found it was actually much cheaper to get a cot mattress made up to our specifications than buying a standard pre-made cot mattress. Also, the custom-made mattress purchased through a baby goods supply shop was made up within a few days of ordering. This is handy to know to ensure a proper-fitting mattress for child safety.

**J Gray
Norseman, WA**

Test times

I am a subscriber with a cot on lay-by and was shocked to read the CHOICE test results. I mentioned the CHOICE article in which nine out of 10 cots [tested] failed, including the one I intended to buy, to the woman in the store. She

said that the test was roughly 12 months old and that the cot had been modified since then. I reread the article, but couldn't find a test date. When was the test conducted?

**RG Stapleton
Kealpa, Victoria**

We bought the cots for the test reported in October 1996 in February and March of that year — approximately six months before publication. This is a fairly normal timeline for a CHOICE test. We can only guess that the salesperson was pulling a date out of the air in order to make a sale.

Shortly before we publish a test we check with the manufacturers that the models tested will still be available in the shops when the relevant CHOICE issue is published, and we ask them to comment on our test results.

*In the case of cots, we asked the manufacturers about any changes that may have been made, or that were planned in light of our results, and published a summary of them in **What the manufacturers said** on page 16. However, without retesting the cots, we have no way of knowing whether the modifications fixed the problems — or didn't even introduce new ones.*



Cot safety standards need to be made mandatory before more children die or are injured.

Large-screen TVs



TV sets with 68 cm screens are becoming increasingly popular — for example, as part of a home theatre system. We put you in the picture about which to buy.

THERE ARE NOW DOZENS OF LARGE-SCREEN TVs on the market, with screen sizes from 64 cm to more than 85 cm. Among these, 68 cm is currently the most popular, so we tested 10 models of that size from top-selling brands.

We bought the cheapest stereo model from each of these brands that had audio and video in and out sockets — so they're models you could choose if you wanted to set up a home theatre system (see page 20).

If you'd like information about other large-screen TVs on the market, turn to *The models we didn't test* on page 28.

Picture quality

We used a carefully controlled viewing panel to assess and compare the TVs for picture quality, and statistically analysed their scores — see page 29 for the results. The panel also noted that some of the TVs had a 'bias' towards different colours, giving, for example, an overall slightly greenish (PANASONIC, TEAC) or reddish (GE, GOLDSTAR, NEC) tinge to the picture that couldn't be removed.

These colour differences can be easily seen when the TVs are set up and switched on next to each other in the shop. If you can't find a model you like that seems to have no colour bias, you'll at least be able to work out which bias you'd prefer to live with.

Sound quality

The audio output sockets of the TVs tested allow you to connect them to your hifi system, which can improve their sound quality. This is how you'd use the TVs in a home theatre system.

However, in most cases you'll probably use the stereo speakers of the TV set. Audio testing revealed considerable differences between models, with the SONY clearly the top performer for sound.

Ease of use

The remote control is the most important ease-of-use aspect for the TVs and formed the major component of our ease-of-use testing. Other significant points regarding the use of the TVs include the following:

- TV sets of the size tested are very heavy — usually around 40 kg — so you're likely to need two people to carry them. Due to their big glass screen, they're particularly front-heavy. Sony recommends anchoring its set to the wall or TV cabinet, and even supplies the equipment to do so.

- As well as normal manual tuning, all the models in the test have an auto tuning feature that allows you to tune in all available channels without having to find them yourself. However, the channels will be given consecutive recall numbers according to their place in the frequency band, so you won't necessarily get the channel number you're familiar with. For example, you might get the ABC on recall number one, Channel 7 on recall number two and so on.

- All the tested models are able to receive weak signals. Problems with picking up a station or with poor reception (interference, 'snowy' or 'ghost' images) can be caused by other electrical appliances or a badly adjusted antenna and can be usually fixed (see CHOICE, April 1996, page 43).

The Spectrum Management Agency (SMA) has published a brochure, *Better television and radio reception*, that identifies various TV and radio interference problems and tells you how to solve them. The brochure is available free of charge from the SMA branch in your state capital — check the White Pages for their phone number.

WHAT TO BUY

SONY KV-T29S21	\$1675
PHILIPS 29PT468A	\$1439
SAMSUNG TC-6865T	\$1475
PANASONIC TC-29SU61A	\$1675

PROFILES

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on checks in October and November 1996 — anything lower is a bargain.



SONY KV-T29S21

Target price: \$1675

Good points

- Best picture quality and sound.
- Well designed remote control.
- Has AV input on the front panel.

Bad points

- Can't 'toggle' between the last two channels selected.
- Instruction manual only average for ease of use.
- No 'personal preference' settings (see table note 3, page 29, for an explanation).
- No connection for S-VHS video equipment.



SAMSUNG TV-686ST

Target price: \$1475

Good points

- Good picture with very good contrast.
- Good sound.
- Very well designed remote control.
- Excellent instruction manual.
- Can 'toggle' between the last two channels selected.
- Has a help menu.
- The only model tested with a holder for an indoor antenna.
- Has 'personal preference' settings.
- Has AV input on front panel.

Bad points

- No connection for S-VHS video equipment.



PHILIPS 29PT468 A/75R

Target price: \$1439

Good points

- Good picture and very good sound.
- Very well designed remote control.
- Very good instruction manual.
- Can 'toggle' between the last two channels selected.
- Has 'personal preference' settings.

Bad points

- No AV input on front panel.
- No connection for S-VHS video equipment.



PANASONIC TC-29SU61A

Target price: \$1675

Good points

- Good picture with very good contrast, but a slight greenish tinge.
- Very good sound overall, but with a slight 'sizzle' on 's' sounds.
- Has AV input on front panel.
- Has a connection for S-VHS video equipment.

Bad points

- Poorly designed remote control.
- Can't 'toggle' between the last two channels selected.
- No 'personal preference' settings.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Make sure your room is big enough: you should sit at least six to eight times the screen width away from a TV — that means about 3.5 to 4.5 m from these TVs.
- If you plan to connect the TV to your hi-fi system, you'll also have to think about space. Ideally the hi-fi speakers and the listener should form an equilateral triangle. With these TVs this means your room should be about 4 to 5 m square or larger.
- If you want to use the TV as part of a home theatre system and you don't have a stereo VCR, your TV needs to have stereo audio out sockets.
- Compare the picture quality of several TVs at a time in a shop. That way it's easier to tell differences — for example, in sharpness or colour balance. Watch several channels and try to find a talk show or the news where you can check for natural skin tones and fine details, such as hair.
- If you're not happy with a picture in the shop, try to adjust the colours, brightness or contrast. However, make sure you don't have to set the controls on maximum to get what you want: picture tubes age over time and you want to have some leeway to change the settings.
- Listen carefully to the sound — ideally to both music and speech. Also turn up the volume and listen for any distortion.
- Check that the remote control buttons are well labelled, easy to use and sensibly placed.

Standard features

All models in the test have the following:

- Stereo sound.
- Audio/video inputs and outputs.
- Auto tune.
- Volume mute.
- Controls for sharpness (except the **TEAC** and **GOLDSTAR**), colour, contrast and brightness.
- Unused-channel skip.
- A 68 cm diagonal screen as claimed (except the **PANASONIC**: 67.4 cm).
- Sleep timer.
- On-screen display.
- Auto 'degaussing', which gets rid of magnetic fields inside the TV that could interfere with the picture (except the **GOLDSTAR**).

68 cm TVs

1

2

2

Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Warranty (years)	Target price (\$)*	Dimensions: WxHxD (mm)	Teletext	Headphone socket	No. of AV inputs	AV input front panel
SONY KV-T29SZ1	Sony	Malaysia	2 (C)	1675	700 x 615 x 540	(K)	✓	2	✓
PHILIPS 29PT468A/75R	Philips	Singapore	1 (C) (D)	1439	760 x 555 x 555			2	
SAMSUNG TV-6865T	Samsung	Korea	2 (C) (E)	1475	715 x 575 x 510	✓	✓	1	✓
PANASONIC TC-29SU61A	Panasonic	Australia (B)	1 (C) (F)	1675	700 x 565 x 480		✓	2	✓
GE 29GP980A	TCE Marketing	Thailand	1	1575	770 x 550 x 485	✓	✓	2	✓
GOLDSTAR CF-29C76X	LG Electronics	Korea	3 (G)	1375	735 x 590 x 485	✓		4	✓
MITSUBISHI CT-29GL1A	Mitsubishi	Singapore	1 (C)	1375	645 x 600 x 495	(K)	✓	3	✓
NEC FS-6805S	NEC	Thailand	1 (C) (H)	1375	760 x 560 x 535	(K)	✓	3	✓
SHARP SX68E7	Sharp	Australia (B)	1	1375	755 x 555 x 500	(K)		1	✓
TEAC CT-M680ST (A)	Teac	China	1 (J)	1250	760 x 575 x 520	✓		1	

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October/November 1996, except for the Philips where it's the price quoted by the manufacturer.

(A) This model has been discontinued but may still be available in shops.

(B) Assembled in Australia.

(C) Only when used in a 'domestic situation'.

(D) Additional extended parts and labour warranty available: two years, \$79; three years, \$99; four years, \$109. Ten-year extended warranty on parts available for \$69.

(E) Additional one-year warranty available for \$40. The Samsung we bought came with a one-year warranty, but the manufacturer assures us it's two years.

(F) Additional two-year extended warranty available for \$25.

(G) The Goldstar we bought came with a one-year warranty but the manufacturer assures us it's three years.

(H) For NEC 63 cm and 68 cm TVs bought between October 1996 and March 31, 1997, the warranty period is three years instead of one year.

(I) Except the external cabinet.

(K) Optional extra.

(L) 10% penalty for internal noise — see table note 7.

(M) 5% penalty for internal noise — see table note 7.

The models we didn't test

If you'd like general market information about the large-screen TVs (68 cm and up) we couldn't test this time, send our Consumer Information Service a stamped, self-addressed envelope marked **Large-screen TV model list**. Write to **CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204**.

While the list won't tell you which models are best for picture and sound quality and so on, it will provide information about factors such as some key features and the recommended retail price at the time we did the research.

WHAT STANDBY COSTS YOU

Many people nowadays leave their TV on standby all the time and simply switch it on and off using the remote. What you may not realise is that standby mode still uses power — with the **TEAC** in this test, enough to cost you nearly \$20 a year.

We measured the power used by each of the TVs in this test both when operating and when on standby. We then calculated how much each TV would cost to run for a year with and without using standby. We based the calculation

on a scenario where the TV is watched for five hours a day and energy costs 12 cents per kWh (the results are in the table, column 4, above).

With most TVs the difference is around \$5 to \$10 — maybe not much of a drain on your pocket, but over the years it adds up, and any energy savings made are also good for the environment (every dollar saved also means around 8 kg less CO₂). And some fire authorities think leaving your TV on standby could be a fire hazard.

How reliable are they?

We asked a group of our subscribers whether their TV had needed repair in the past 12 months, and whether they would be likely to buy the same brand again. The graphs on the right show the results for TV sets with a 63 cm or larger screen.

The results are given for those brands that received at least 50 responses (see the number in brackets).

About 15% of the people surveyed indicated their TV had needed a repair in that time, with the average cost of repair being about \$103. Of these repairs, the most common were picture problems.

Percentage not needing repair

NEC (113)	93
AWA (79)	90
Panasonic/National (225)	90
Sharp (68)	90
Sony (124)	90
Sanyo (63)	81
Philips (260)	75

Percentage who would buy again

Sony (137)	99
Sanyo (65)	97
AWA (81)	96
Panasonic/National (232)	96
Sharp (70)	96
NEC (121)	94
Philips (274)	92

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Personal preference settings	Power costs per year with / without standby (\$)	Frequency range (Hz)	Picture score (%)	Sound score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)
	36.05 / 26.06	70-16000	80	90	80	82	SONY KV-T29SZ1
✓	33.24 / 28.25	55-20000	70	80	90	74	PHILIPS 29PT468A/75R
✓	33.81 / 27.16	90-15000	70	70	95	73	SAMSUNG TV-686ST
	35.59 / 29.35	75-15000	70	80	70	72	PANASONIC TC-29SU61A
✓	33.97 / 26.06	130-16000	70	40	85	67	GE 29GP980A
✓	29.20 / 23.87	250-13000	60	60	90	63	GOLDSTAR CF-29C76X
✓	35.48 / 27.16	75-17000	60	60	80	62	MITSUBISHI CT-29GL1A
✓	36.27 / 26.28	100-20000	60	70	60	62	NEC FS-6805S
	29.82 / 27.16	80-15000	60	50 (L)	60	59	SHARP SX68E7
✓	41.70 / 22.56	150-10000	50	45 (M)	55	50	TEAC CT-M680ST (A)

1 Teletext

A tick in this column indicates the model can give you access to printed news, information services and captions on selected TV programs.

2 Number of AV inputs / AV input on front panel

The number in the first of these two columns tells you how many audio/video (AV) inputs you can use at the same time. If the TV set has more than one, you'll be able to connect several input sources (such as a VCR, a laser disc player and a camcorder) at the same time.

An AV input on the front panel is particularly useful because TV sets of this size are quite heavy and you don't want to have to shift them to get at the rear connections whenever you want, say, to connect your camcorder.

3 Personal preference settings

Models with a tick in this column allow the storage of one or more personal picture and sound settings.

4 Power costs with/without standby

The two figures in this column show the costs per year of using your TV with and without standby respectively, calculated for a defined usage pattern — see *What standby costs you*, left, for details.

5 Frequency range

These figures give the high and low frequency measurements for the TV's sound system. A good hifi system, in comparison, has a frequency range of about 50 Hz to 20,000 Hz, so if you connect your TV to your hifi system you'll probably get a better sound.

6 Picture score

The picture quality was assessed by a viewing panel of 12 people and their scores were analysed statistically. The score represents an average of the viewers' preferences.

We also carried out a number of technical video tests, such as colour balance, resolution, convergence and geometric distortion. All the models performed well in these tests.

7 Sound score

We measured the TVs' sound system for frequency range, spectral balance, polar balance and sound pressure level and assessed it for internal noise. The **SHARP** and the **TEAC** were penalised for audible running noise.

8 Ease of use score

The main component of this score was the ease of use of the remote control, as this is the main link between viewer and TV set. In addition we assessed the TV's instruction manual — for example, whether the words and diagrams are adequate and of good quality, and whether they have a useful index.

9 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of picture quality, sound and ease of use, weighted as follows:

- Picture quality: 75%.
- Sound quality: 15%.
- Ease of use: 10%.



A good remote like the Philips, (left), has well spaced buttons grouped sensibly to make different functions easy to find. Colours also help differentiate functions. Remotes that just have rows of same-sized and same-coloured buttons — like the Sharp (right) — are much less easy to use.



BODYWISE

Choosing foods — does a tick help?

TICKS, HEART LOGOS AND other 'choose me' messages on food labels can leave you feeling overwhelmed on your weekly trip down the supermarket aisle. What do you believe when it comes to choosing healthier food?

Like many shoppers, you probably don't have time to read every detail on a food label while you're standing in the aisle, so you may think a symbol like the Heart Foundation's tick is useful. The tick means the Heart Foundation has checked that the food meets its criteria for nutrients such as fat, fibre and salt.

However, there are some important things the label doesn't tell you about the National Heart Foundation's 'Pick the Tick' program and some basic nutrition advice you need to keep in mind.

No fee, no tick

What the label doesn't tell you is that manufacturers must pay a fee of between \$2000 and \$50,000 per year to use the Heart Foundation's tick — the larger their product sales, the more the tick costs them. It also doesn't mention the scheme is voluntary, so a similar product without the tick could be just as good nutritionally, but not opt to pay the fee. Currently around 700 products have paid to carry the tick.

A good example is oils. Don't be fooled into thinking that oils with the tick are better for you than oils without it. In fact, nearly all oils on the market are eligible to carry the Heart Foundation's tick (for containing little saturated fat), but only around a quarter cough up the fee. Most bottled oils you'll find in supermarkets have much less saturated fat than butter, but of course they're still 100% fat and should only be used in small amounts — even if they have the tick.

Selective information

The Heart Foundation argues the tick has encouraged manufacturers to reformulate products to meet its nutrition criteria. It also says it promotes the tick in the context of a balanced diet.

In the Heart Foundation's own research, 60% of consumers said they liked the tick program. The question is, would they like it as much if they knew only products that applied were assessed by the



It's a balanced diet, not individual 'magic' foods, that's important for good health — and food with a tick may be no better than another food whose manufacturer hasn't shelled out the money to use it.



The Heart Foundation recently publicised its fee-paying system in magazine ads and some promotional material in response to public pressure. So why not tell consumers on the label next to the logo that it's a paid endorsement?

program, and that those approved pay a fee based on expected product sales?

Where the money goes

In 1995, only around a third of the money raised by Pick the Tick went to the Heart Foundation's general education and research budget; the rest was swallowed up by administration and promotion of the tick program.

The Heart Foundation is not in it for the money — most of its income comes from donations, not from the tick program. The Foundation views the tick as a



Don't be fooled — tick or no tick, all oils are 100% fat.

general healthy-eating program that helps meet the needs of consumers — even if participating companies view the tick more in terms of marketing and sales.

While promoting healthy eating may be the intention, the Heart Foundation's own research found over half of the people surveyed thought the tick meant the food could help prevent heart disease, and nearly 10% of people thought foods without the tick are bad for you.

If people put these beliefs into action, they might not end up eating a balance of foods necessary for good health. It's a balanced diet, not individual 'magic' foods, that are the key to healthy eating.

When low fat means 25%

Even though the Heart Foundation's own advertisement claims the tick tells you which dairy products are low in fat, some hard cheeses that carry the tick can still have up to 25% fat — not very low overall. While cheeses with the tick are lower in fat than most regular cheeses of the same type, they're still a significant source of saturated fat, so watch how much you eat.

The bottom line is that the tick isn't a licence to eat as much of a ticked food as you like.

HEARTS AND FLOWERS?

What the heart symbol on this product has to do with the 'no cholesterol, no lactose' message around it is anyone's guess. It's saturated fat, not cholesterol, that has the greatest effect on your blood cholesterol, and lactose isn't related to heart disease at all.

Even though this product is low in saturated fat, just drinking soy milk without making other changes to your diet and lifestyle won't necessarily reduce your risk of heart disease. Many other things, such as exercising more, giving up smoking and cutting the fat in your overall diet, are also important.



The food labelling jungle

'Health claims' that link a nutrient level (like 'reduced fat') in a food to a lower risk of heart disease, for example, aren't allowed on food products. CHOICE considers the Heart Foundation's tick and some other look-alike symbols sail pretty close to the wind when it comes to health claims.

Food labelling in general can be extremely confusing, and CHOICE thinks health claims and endorsement logos distract people from the important message about a balanced diet.

Consumers seem to agree — recent studies in Australia and the US found that consumers have a high level of mistrust of the concept of health claims appearing

on product packages and see them as potentially confusing.

In the long term the labels on foods need to be made clearer so that you can easily compare products — whether they carry the tick or not. The Australia New Zealand Food Authority is currently reviewing nutrition labelling on food.

As a minimum, CHOICE would like to see nutrition information panels, with relevant information about ingredients like saturated fat and dietary fibre, required on all processed foods. At present, only food products that make a nutrient claim like 'low in fat' have to carry a nutrition information panel. We'll keep you posted on how useful the outcomes of the government's review are. □

A HEALTHY DIET: TIPS ON CHOOSING FOODS

Variety

Choose a mixture of different food types, such as cereals, fruit, vegetables, dairy products, fish and meat. Also choose a variety within each food type — like rice one night, pasta the next.

Eat plenty of bread and cereals, vegetables, legumes (beans and peas) and fruit, and keep treats like cakes, chips or ice cream for only occasional eating.

Milk, yoghurt and cheese

You can choose reduced or low-fat milk and yoghurt to keep your fat intake down. Most regular cheeses (like cheddar), however, are high in total and saturated fat. It's difficult to make a truly low-fat hard cheese, so look for 'reduced-fat' varieties. Some soft cheeses like cottage cheese are also good choices, though they're not all as high in calcium as regular cheese.

Bread and cereals

Bread and cereals are a good source of fibre and complex carbohydrates — choose wholegrain varieties where possible for extra fibre. You can also look for breakfast cereals and bread that say they're 'high in fibre' on the label.

Most breakfast cereals and bread are also low in fat (although some toasted mueslis have a high fat content). Some breakfast cereals may also be

high in sugar — the higher up it appears in the list of ingredients, the more sugar the product is likely to contain.

If you're concerned about salt you'll find most breakfast cereals and bread carry nutrition information panels to help you compare the level of salt in your favourite brands.

Margarines, spreads and oils

To reduce your fat intake, look for claims on margarine and spreads that tell you the product is reduced in fat. Even so, all margarines, spreads and oils should still only be eaten in small amounts.

Sometimes panels list fat broken down into its different types (saturated, monounsaturated, polyunsaturated and sometimes even trans fat). Look for foods lowest in saturated fat and, where it's labelled, also lowest in trans fat (see CHOICE, October 1995, for more information).



The Heart Foundation's tick isn't the only logo of concern — CHOICE thinks other look-alike symbols (for example the ones shown above) give the same message.



Budget changes to your super

The 1996 August Budget didn't shake up super as completely as had been expected, and it left some people still not satisfactorily covered for a decent quality of life in retirement.

SOME OF THE CHANGES TO SUPER that were made in last year's Budget were positive — we outline them below. But super still won't provide a decent quality of life for everyone in retirement, which is why CHOICE is convinced the aged pension will still have to form an essential part of any retirement income system.

This article summarises the changes made by the August 1996 Budget and any new factors you'll need to consider. If you'd like to know more about the basics of superannuation, you'll find them explained in two CHOICE articles in the April and May 1996 issues.

Bad news for high income earners

The major change is an additional 'surcharge' — that is, a tax — on super contributions for high income earners. Previously, amounts paid into super by your employer were taxed at 15% instead of normal income tax rates no matter how much you earned. From August 20, 1996, anyone earning \$71,000 or more has an additional tax applied.

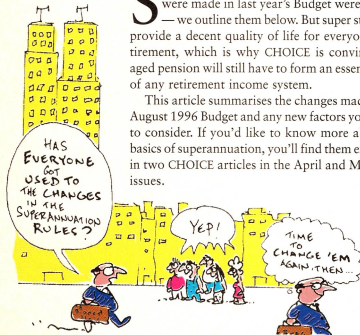
The surcharge is phased in at 1% for every \$1000 earned above \$70,000. For example, if you earn \$71,000 you'll have to pay a 1% surcharge (meaning your super is taxed at 16% overall), if you earn \$72,000, 2% (17% overall), and so on, to a maximum surcharge of 15% (30% overall) for people earning \$85,000 and over.

Even with the maximum surcharge, the tax treatment of super contributions remains less than the top marginal income tax rates — which makes super still a good option. For example, if you earn \$85,000 per year and pay the full 15% surcharge, your income going into super would be taxed at 30% — 17% less than if you took that money as regular income.

However, if your super fund doesn't have your tax file number by August 31, 1997, you'll pay the maximum surcharge no matter what you earn.

Even with the higher taxes on the money your employer puts into your fund, don't forget that the interest your super earns (while in the fund) is still taxed at only 15% — and you'd be hard-pressed finding better tax treatment of an investment elsewhere.

On the other hand, there is still the major disadvantage of limited access to your super, and you might be reluctant to tie up extra money in it and risk yet another rule change — with more than 2000 changes in recent years, this is not an unreasonable expectation!



SUPER CHANGES IN SUMMARY

- A 'surcharge' — extra tax — on contributions for people with incomes over \$70,999 — effective from August 20, 1996.
- The income threshold for opting out of compulsory super goes up from \$450 to \$900 a month — effective from July 1, 1997.
- An 18% tax rebate for contributions up to \$3000 made for your non-working or low-income spouse — effective from July 1, 1997.
- The contribution age limit up from 65 to 70 — you can keep paying into super, provided you're employed for a minimum of 10 hours per week — effective from July 1, 1997.
- Retirement savings accounts — to be available from July 1, 1997.
- People over 55 will now have super assets included in the means test when applying for social security benefits — effective from September 1997.

Note: All these proposals are still to be legislated for, and could be subject to changes in the process.

More options for the lower-paid

One of the main criticisms CHOICE has made of the super system was that it seemed designed to suit the working patterns of the 1950s: the biggest winners were full-time workers who stayed in one job for long periods — mainly men. For people in part-time or casual work, or those who change jobs regularly, the system wasn't working so well. Some attempt has been made to address this at least in part.

If you earn less than \$900 per month (previously \$450), from July 1, 1997, you will be able to opt out of the system and take your employer's compulsory super contribution as wages instead.

This is not to say super is inappropriate if you're on a low income, but for many people in this position there may be more pressing priorities than saving for retirement.

If you earn \$10,000 a year, say, opting out could mean taking \$600 extra (\$480 after tax) as pay. If you change jobs regularly, this might otherwise end up spread across different super accounts and earning just enough to cover administration charges.

Spouse rebate — useful for some

Another group not well covered by the super system is people who either don't work or have broken work patterns — such as if you've taken time off work to have one or more children. Super can be the most effective savings vehicle, but it's not much help if you're not working. From July 1, 1997, a spouse will be able to contribute to super for these people.

A tax rebate of 18% will be available on contributions to a super fund for a non-income-earning spouse or a working spouse with an annual income below \$10,800.

Government co-contributions

It's still not decided what proportion of your income will have to be paid into super. At present, employers contribute 6% for most employees, phasing up to 9% by 2002.

Under the old Labor Government an additional compulsory 1% employee contribution was planned to start in July 1997, phasing up to 3% by 1999; this was to be matched by a 3% co-contribution by the government by 2000.

While the present Government has made a commitment to the co-contribution, it has indicated that it may not pay it as super. It's about time it made its intentions clear on this issue so people can adequately plan for their retirement.

RSAs: Super accounts or super duds?

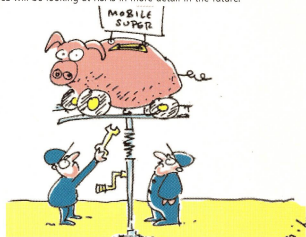
The Budget was also the official announcement of the introduction of retirement savings accounts (RSAs) from July 1, 1997.

RSAs are to be a low-risk, cash-based, low-cost, totally mobile super product that will work similarly to a passbook bank account. They will be offered by banks, building societies, credit unions and life insurance companies, and be subject to the same tax treatment and rules about when you can access the money as superannuation.

RSAs should help part-time and itinerant workers, who are disadvantaged when super is tied to the workplace. They could also serve as a secure place to put your super in the few years prior to retirement.

However, we're concerned because 'low risk' generally means lower return, and people could be short-changed if their money is left in an RSA over their whole working life — their super could fail even to keep pace with inflation, let alone make any profit for them to live on after retirement.

CHOICE will be looking at RSAs in more detail in the future.



The maximum amount you can put into a spouse's fund and earn the rebate is \$3000. If you made the maximum contribution for your spouse, you'd have the advantage of having this money taxed at only 15% (contribution tax), as well as getting an extra \$540 back from the tax office. Of course, this isn't much use to those without a spouse, and clearly superannuation still doesn't cover everyone.

Still room for improvement

There is still plenty of room for improvement in the super system.

The Government promised it would give you greater choice of both where you can put your super and how it's invested. Greater choice — when it happens on a broad scale — will result in some much-needed competition in the industry and should force super funds to improve their service. But it will also mean much more information will be needed by consumers to make an informed choice.

The success of these reforms will depend largely on the efforts of the industry itself — which has complained loudly about the Budget changes. □

You were asking ...

We receive many letters asking us about our work — this month we answer some of your questions about CHOICE and the Consumers' Association.

Shopping around for CHOICE

Why can't I buy CHOICE at my newsagent?

Most magazines make most of their profits from the advertising they carry, not from their purchase price. Because our independence is fundamental to what we do, we don't carry any advertising. We rely on your subscriptions to provide us with income.

Having your subscription committed for a year means we can plan ahead in terms of the tests and surveys we can afford to bring you. It would cost us extra money to print and distribute copies for sale on newsstands — money there's no guarantee of getting back if people choose not to buy the magazine in a particular month.

Selecting products

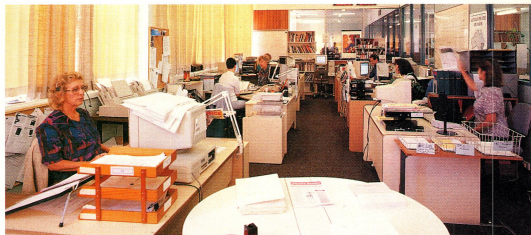
How do you decide which products to include in test reports?

Unfortunately we don't have enough money or time to test all the brands and models of any particular product on the market. Instead, our product researchers keep in close contact with the marketplace to find out trends and developments, and which brands and models are the most popular and the most widely available. We base our choice of products on this information.

Keeping up-to-date

How up-to-date are the models in your test?

At the start of work on a test, our product researchers investigate which models will be on the market when you read our report. We check again as close as possible to



A bonus of subscribing to CHOICE: you can ring or write to our Consumer Information Service with any consumer queries or problems you have.

publishing, and if significant changes have occurred, we tell you about it in the report. So when you go into a shop to buy that product, you're armed with the most up-to-date information we can provide.

However, because the whole process from testing the products to printing the magazine takes around six months, sometimes you'll find new models in the shops that weren't yet available when we bought for testing.

Judging product performance

Where do you get your test results?

We do the vast majority of product tests in our own laboratories — we have a lab for testing just about anything: kitchen and laundry products, electrical products, children's products and toys, DIY, computers, to name a few.

Our testing programs are designed to test rigorously to Australian standards and beyond — if the Australian standard wouldn't

tell us what you want to know about a product, we design further tests. Our aim is to get the full story on every product.

On some occasions when we don't have the equipment to do a specialised test (for example, testing the bacteria in a sample of salad) we commission an independent lab

outside CHOICE to do the testing — but only after we've assured ourselves of the lab's competence, independence and skill.

Best prices

How do you get the 'target prices' you print for products tested?

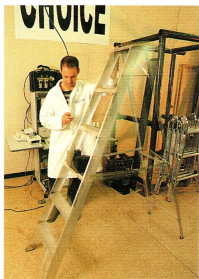
Just before we print a test report, we send out buyers all over Australia to find out how much the models tested are selling for in each state. Each buyer checks the price of products in several stores, to ensure we're getting a realistic overview of how much they cost.

We analyse the prices from all over Australia before deciding on the target price. We look for a price that's good value but also realistic. So if you can buy a product for our target price, it means you're not paying too much for it, but if you can get it for less, grab it — it's probably a bargain.

Finding out facts

Where do your survey results come from?

One way of sharing your experiences



Our tests are designed to give you the full story about products — safety, quality and ease of use.

with other consumers is by responding to one of our surveys.

As a subscriber, chances are you'll be asked to participate in at least one every year. All our surveys are national, and your name is selected randomly from our subscriber database.

We contact over 100,000 of you every year, either by mail or phone, to survey your opinions on an vast range of topics. Your experiences with a particular product or service, such as your car, your local supermarket or your insurance company, are important not only to us, but to other consumers.

Some of our surveys ask which of our articles you enjoyed reading, what you would like to see more of and what issues or products you would be interested in us reporting on. Our aim is to continuously improve the information we provide — to give you what you want, when you want it.

So if you receive a survey and have a minute to fill it in, please post it back to us in our reply-paid envelope — the more of you we hear from, the better the service we can provide you with.

Answering your letters

What happens to your letter when I write to you?

We receive around 300 letters (and 1750 phone calls) a month, which all go directly to our Consumer Information Service. When appropriate they're passed on to other members of staff to help them in their research, to develop ideas for our articles or to be published in the magazine so that other consumers can benefit from your experiences.

Maintaining our independence

Why do I see advertising using CHOICE's name when you say this isn't allowed?

If people thought CHOICE endorsed any product or service, they'd soon stop believing in the independence

of our test results. So we do everything in our power to stop companies or individuals using our test results or recommendations as part of their advertising promotions.

When we come across a company using our name to promote its goods we write and ask them not to do so. The vast majority comply — although not always happily. Unfortunately, some companies persist, at which point we begin consulting our lawyers.

We need your help to spot companies who use our name in advertising. Please phone, fax or e-mail and let us know, so we can take action.

Subscribers are our priority

Why should I subscribe to CHOICE if the media is going to report on your stories?

The only way to get the full story is to read CHOICE. We ask the media not to name brands or companies that we have listed in our test results, and they usually co-operate in this. However, you may occasionally have seen newspaper articles or TV shows which gave detailed brand-specific CHOICE information against our wishes.

On occasion some have used our information without acknowledging us as their source, or copied our test methods without giving us credit.

The media also likes to use CHOICE as a source on which to build their own stories, especially if we report on something controversial (such as our test in October last year that showed nine of the 10 cots tested were unsafe).

But it works both ways — the media is a means for us to promote essential consumer issues (like cot safety), and to get real action for



consumers by using public pressure to influence the government and institutions such as banks.

However, our subscribers are our first priority, so to ensure you receive the information first, a media embargo is placed on every new issue — you should get CHOICE in the first week of the month, and the media embargo is until the second Tuesday of each month.

While the media usually respects our embargo, sometimes a TV program or newspaper will break it in order to present the story before everyone else.

Unbelievable

I've had salespeople criticise CHOICE and tell me not to rely on your recommendations. Who do I believe?

When we recommend a product, it's because our rigorous testing and research have proven it to be worthy of recommendation. This doesn't always please its competitors or salespeople with an interest in selling competing products.

As a result, they may make comments to shoppers that question

Some of the advertisers who have used our name over the years — and prompted a swift response from us.

our integrity and reputation.

Comments like this could be defamatory, and we need your help in order to counter them. If a company or salesperson makes this sort of remarks to you, please let us know.

Promoting CHOICE

Why do I receive CHOICE marketing in my mailbox when I already subscribe to the magazine?

We're always trying to reach new subscribers — the more people like you who subscribe, the more money we have to do the tests, surveys and reports you want to see. We've found one of the best ways of reaching new subscribers is by using 'to the householder' direct mail.

Unfortunately, this means you'll sometimes receive mail promoting CHOICE — for which we apologise. However, if you don't want it to go to waste, we'd appreciate you passing it on to someone who might not know about CHOICE. □

Letters, please.

Our regular letters page is on page 25 this month — please keep sending your questions, comments and experiences to share with other subscribers.

For information on how to contact us, see page 2.

Mac attack!

We pitted the new Apple Macintosh against the multimedia computers tested for our last issue — and it proved equal to the best of them.

ONE OF THE FIRST DECISIONS when buying a new computer is whether you want a Mac or a PC. They both do the same sorts of tasks, but they're not compatible — without special software or hardware you can't run programs for one on the other. So once you've made your decision you're locked in.

Which of them do you use at work, which do your kids use at school, what do your friends have? Since you'd probably be equally happy with a Mac or PC on their own merits, these are the questions on which to base your decision. You don't want to be a lone PC in a community of Macs, or vice versa.

To weigh the newly released Mac against the name-brand PCs reported on in December 1996, we compared the Mac to the best of the PCs we recommended for family use — the GATEWAY 2000 P5-133.

How the Mac measures up

In our test the MACINTOSH Performa 5260/120 and the GATEWAY 2000 P5-133 were neck and neck when it came to performance, but the MAC's instructions were judged to be better and more useful.

OUR TEST

The MACINTOSH Performa

5260/120 has similar specifications to the PCs tested for the December 1996 issue:

CPU: Power PC 120 MHz.

RAM: 16 Mb.

Hard disk size: 1.6 Gb.

CD-ROM: Oct-speed.

Modem: 28,800 Bps.

Monitor: 14".

■ **Performance:** We tested the MAC against December's top-performing PC (the GATEWAY 2000 P5-133) using *MS Works 4* on the *MAC*, and *Claris Works 4* on the *MAC*. These are the two word processing/spreadsheet programs provided with many PCs and with the *MAC*, respectively. And although they're less powerful than *MS Word*

and *MS Excel*, they're adequate for most home users.

We assessed the computers' performance by measuring the time taken to carry out a large spell check and a complex spreadsheet calculation, and also assessed three popular games designed for each type of machine.

■ Each machine's **instructions** were also assessed for clarity and usefulness.

■ The **overall score** was calculated as follows:
Instructions score: 20%
Performance score: 80%

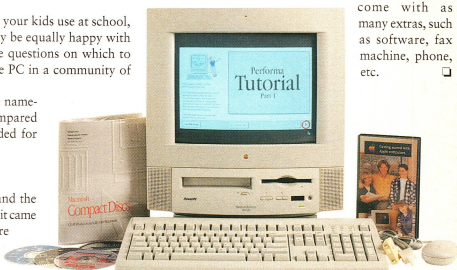
Note: These scores are not directly comparable to the scores for the PCs in December CHOICE, as the tests were different.

Range of software

For most uses there's a larger range of software available for PCs than the *MAC* — especially when it comes to games. And if you have very long, complex calculations in spreadsheets or handle large documents with your word processor, you'll need to choose your Mac software carefully — certainly when we tried *MS Word 6* and *MS Excel 5* (both powerful and popular packages) for these tasks, they ran much faster on PCs.

When you're buying, keep in mind there are cheaper computers available than the brand-names we tested — and in a recent test for our sister magazine, *Computer CHOICE*, several of them performed just as well as the brand-name models. The drawbacks? They weren't as easy to set up, and didn't

come with as many extras, such as software, fax machine, phone, etc. □



Macintosh Performa 5260/120

Price: \$3195

Warranty: One year parts and labour 'back-to-base' (you return the computer for repairs); repairs have three months' warranty.

Screen size (stated/measured): 14" / 12.4" (35.5 / 31.5 cm).

Instructions score: 100% (Gateway 2000: 95%).

Performance score: 85% (Gateway 2000: 85%).

Overall score: 88% (Gateway 2000: 87%).

Good points

- Similar performance to the best PC in last month's test.
- Comes with a good range of software.
- Includes a system called

Launcher, which makes it easier for beginners to use.

- Excellent instructions.
- Very easy to set up.
- Can be used as an answering machine.
- Has a headphone socket.
- Help lines are open 9 am to 8 pm (EST) Monday to Saturday and 12 noon to 8 pm Sunday.
- Includes a fax/data/voice modem.

Bad points

- Compared to the PCs on test last month, there's less scope for expansion inside the computer itself. The only expansion slot contains the modem, so, for example, you can't add a TV tuner without removing the modem.

New Year New Start

Help keep those
new year's
resolutions

With a Little Help

How do you choose a counsellor or therapist? How effective can they be? *With a Little Help* offers detailed advice, information and checklists to help you make an informed choice. The author, Dr Deborah Saltman, is Professor of General Practice at the University of Sydney, and author of *In Transition*.
WALH \$18

Marketing Yourself to Employers

If you're looking for a new job this book offers practical assistance. It supplies advice on refining your job search, using networks, and improving your application and interview techniques.

MYTE \$30 including
Windows disk

Power Learning

Whatever your learning style, *Power Learning* can help you improve it. Learn to identify it and use the advice and techniques suggested to enhance it.

PL \$14.50

Mind Body Medicine

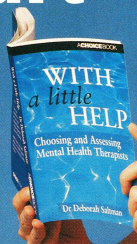
Evidence is growing that thoughts, beliefs and emotions can have a major impact on your physical well-being. *Mind Body Medicine* presents the findings of more than 30 scientists and scholars about this relationship between mind and body.

MBM \$31.50 (subscribers)
\$35 (non-subscribers)

The Choice Guide to Vitamins and Minerals

This popular and useful guide explains the facts about vitamins, minerals and other food supplements. It includes tables explaining the best food sources of each vitamin.

CGVM \$16 (subscribers)
\$18 (non-subscribers)



CHOICE Consumer's Diary 1997

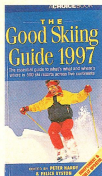
Features a week to an opening with a full 1997 calendar on display, wire binding, useful addresses, practical consumer tips, monthly expense planners, an address section and pages for notes.

1997 \$15

SPECIAL OFFER:

POSTAGE-FREE for CHOICE SUBSCRIBERS

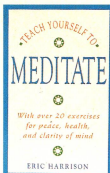
ORDER FORM NEXT PAGE



The Good Skiing Guide 1997

If you're planning a ski trip for the northern winter, *The Good Skiing Guide 1997* is essential reading. Focusing especially on Europe and North America, it independently reviews over 500 ski resorts, with details of difficulty, access, childcare, accommodation, prices and ski schools. It includes colour maps of runs.

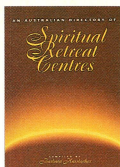
SKIG \$25



Teach Yourself to Meditate

More and more people are recognising the benefits of meditation. *Teach Yourself to Meditate* clearly explains how you can incorporate meditation in your life. Exercises are included.

TYTM \$17



An Australian Directory of Spiritual Retreat Centres

The centres listed offer accommodation and support in your spiritual search. There are listings for a wide variety of belief systems and non-religious centres, and health farms are also included.

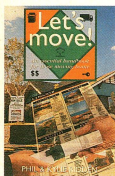
SPRT \$15



Understanding Back Trouble

About 75% of Australians will experience back pain at some stage in their life. This book explains how your back works, how to protect it, what can go wrong and what treatments (traditional and alternative) are available.

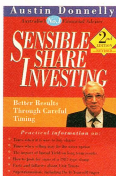
UBT \$18



Let's Move!

Buying and selling a home is a large financial responsibility, one too important to leave to chance. *Let's Move!* offers advice, useful checklists and addresses to make your move a smarter one.

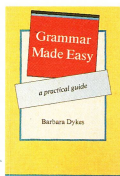
LM \$17



Sensible Share Investing

Taken from the experience of 40 years in the finance sector, the author sets out his advice on shares, unit trusts, analysing performance and much more.

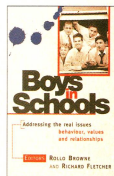
SSI \$25



Grammar Made Easy

GRAMMAR. If you just shuddered you need *Grammar Made Easy*. It clearly and simply sets out the rules of grammar, includes exercises to complete and has a section on common mistakes.

GME \$17



Boys in School

Bullying, gender stereotyping, low self-esteem, homophobia and peer pressure are all problems facing boys in school today. This book presents some innovative techniques that can be used to combat these issues.

BIS \$20

Order Form

Code	Title	Qty	Item price	Total price

Plus postage and handling (\$3 for one item plus \$1.20 for each extra item)*

*The 1997 CHOICE Consumer's Diary is postage-free for CHOICE subscribers. Total

I enclose: ☐ cheque ☐ money order (payable to the Australian Consumers' Association)

or, I wish to pay by: ☐ Bankcard ☐ Mastercard ☐ Visa ☐ Amex Expiry ____ / ____

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Name on card Signature

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms First name Last name Subscriber number

Address Postcode Phone (bus.)

Postage & handling: \$3 for one item plus \$1.20 for each extra item ordered. Some books may have to be sent separately to keep postage costs down. This is due to Australia Post's vagaries, not ours. Please allow 3 to 4 weeks for delivery. If any order cannot be filled for a substantial length of time, we'll let you know and give you the option of cancellation.

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World Wide Web address: <http://www.sofcom.com.au/ACA/>

Subscriber 23rd draw

Our 23rd draw will be held on April 4, 1997

Two lucky people will win prizes from tests published in CHOICE in September 1996.

For new subscriptions and renewals received January 1 to March 31, 1997.

These are products we bought for testing, so you won't be the first to turn them on or set them up. But we'll cover any service problems with a CHOICE warranty that'll match the manufacturer's — just as if you'd bought them new.



All new CHOICE subscriptions and renewals received from members and personal subscribers (including donors of gift subscriptions) by March 31 will go into the draw, unless of course you indicate you don't want to be included.

Subscriber draws are held every quarter. If you're on a two-year subscription you'll be entered on your first anniversary as well as when you renew.

First prize: ▲

A vacuum cleaner valued at up to \$200.

Second prize: ►

A garden blower/vac valued at up to \$180.



Use the order form overleaf to subscribe

CONDITIONS APPLY
CALL (02) 9577 3399 FOR DETAILS

The Australian Consumers' Association,
57 Carrington Rd, Marrickville NSW 2204
NSW permit No TC 96/7241, ACT Permit No. TP 96/1206
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*You want a petrol
lawn trimmer that's
both a strong
performer and easy to
use — and our test
showed this
combination is hard
to find.*



Spinning a line

LAWN TRIMMERS SPIN A NYLON LINE AT HIGH speed to cut through grass, weeds and other plants. You can use them to clear grass that's too long for your lawnmower or that your mower can't reach — for example around trees. You can also use them to neaten edges along paths and flowerbeds.

Electric, petrol or batteries?

Lawn trimmers are driven by mains electricity, petrol or batteries. Electric lawn trimmers are usually less powerful and slower than petrol models. However, the best electric trimmers can give a similar performance to some petrol trimmers, and they tend to be lighter, quieter and cheaper. But they're limited by their need for a power supply and the length of your extension cord.

Battery-powered models aim to avoid this problem: they operate with rechargeable batteries and aren't dependent on mains power. However, manufacturers we spoke to say one battery charge will only last for around 20 to 30 minutes, which often won't be enough to trim large areas in one go. Recharging the battery is said to take 12 to 24 hours.

Like battery models, petrol lawn trimmers allow you to work away from a power supply. They fall into two main categories: models with a straight shaft (so-called brushcutters) are designed more for professional users and heavy-duty tasks like clearing heavy growth; curved-shaft models are mainly for home use.

We tested curved-shaft petrol lawn trimmers selling for up to \$250, looking at a maximum of two models per brand.

What they can do

- **Trimming along fences:** This is the most basic task for lawn trimmers, done with the cutting line moving horizontally along the ground. None of the models in the test had problems with it.
- **Trimming along paths (edging):** To do this, you turn the lawn trimmer so that the cutting line runs vertically along the edge of the path. There were differences between the models but all gave at least a satisfactory performance.
- **Slashing long grass:** This task was carried out on a property where the grass hadn't been cut for many years — very harsh conditions that separated the strong from the weak. The RYOBI Weed Wasp RWT285SS, the STIHL FS36 and the two McCULLOCHs proved to be the strongest of the models that didn't end up in the 'not recommended' category for other reasons (see *Problems*, page 42). At the other end of the scale, the task was too much for the JONSERED GT21L and the WEED EATER XT25 Feather Lite.

Using them

Most manufacturers don't seem to be able to make a powerful performer that's also very easy to use. The model with the lowest performance score, the WEED EATER XT25 Feather Lite, clearly stood out as the easiest trimmer to use. On the other hand, the high-performing McCULLOCH Roadrunner III, for example, was quite bulky, and designed so that you'd have to stoop considerably when edging.

WHAT TO BUY

At the top end of the ratings the trimmers divide into two categories: stronger performers with reasonable ease of use and one model that stands out as the easiest to use.

So our recommendations are based on what you want to do with the trimmer:

■ **If you have a well-maintained yard** and just want to keep it that way, the **WEED EATER XT25 Feather Lite** (\$180) is a good choice. It stood out as the easiest trimmer to use due to its light weight and good balance. It didn't perform as well as the other recommended trimmers, but there's probably no task in this kind of garden it won't be able to handle easily. It was also the quietest of all the models tested and had no problems during the test. On the downside, it'll soon reach its limit if areas become overgrown.

■ **If you have a yard with very long or thick grass**, or with heavily overgrown edges, you'll need a powerful trimmer like the **RYOBI Weed Wasp RWT285SS** (\$200), the **STIHL FS36** (\$230) or **McCULLOCH PM1** (\$200), which did well in our performance tests. However, the **McCULLOCH PM1** is fairly bulky and may be awkward to use for some people, and the **STIHL FS36** had a problem with its starter cord (see *Problems*, right).

■ **About equal for performance and ease of use.** The **HUSQVARNA Mondo** (\$250) was good for both. However, it had a problem with its starter cord (see *Problems*, right) and cut only slowly in long grass.

The **JONSERED GT30L** and **WEEDEATER XT30** ended up in our 'not recommended' category because of some severe in-use problems, despite their good performance — see *Problems*, right, for details.



A good choice for a well maintained yard only — if your garden has grass like this, the easy-to-use Weedeater XT25 Feather Lite (pictured) won't be able to cope.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

While in the shop, see whether the trimmer feels comfortable. A heavy model won't necessarily be uncomfortable to use as long as it's well balanced. Make sure the shaft is long enough for you: check whether you have to stoop when using the trimmer for clearing and edging. In addition, there are some features to look for:

■ **Adjustable second handle:** When you rotate the trimmer from the trimming to edging position, you have to rotate the second handle around the shaft. This is much more convenient if you can adjust the handle's securing bolt with a knob or wing nut, rather than with a separate tool.

■ **Clutch:** The clutch used on lawn trimmers engages when you press the throttle and rev the motor, and disengages when you release the throttle and the motor is just idling. This prevents the line from scalping your lawn or hitting you when — for example — you're resting the trimmer on the ground. However, a clutch is usually only available on more expensive models.

■ **Shoulder harness:** A harness that clips onto the shaft of the trimmer and supports its weight can be very useful if you're trimming large areas with a heavy trimmer. Usually you have to buy a harness as an extra; make sure the trimmer you buy has provision to attach it.

■ **Safety guard:** This is a guard mounted around the rear of the cutting head. It limits the amount of debris thrown around, but a very large guard can obstruct your view of the cutting line when using the trimmer for edging.

■ **Length-of-line limiting blade:** This is a small blade mounted on the safety guard that cuts off the trimming line at the correct length. It's an essential feature, as cutting with excessive line can overload the motor.

■ **Line-feed system:** All the models in our test had semi-automatic bump-feed systems: if you require more line, you tap the cutting head on the ground and a new section of line will feed out. If it works properly (see below), this is much more convenient than a manual system, where you have to pull line from the spool yourself or replace a short length of line in the line holder.

PROBLEMS

During our tests we encountered various problems with several of the lawn trimmers — those listed below are just a few examples. When a problem was so serious that the trimmer effectively became unusable, we relegated the model to our 'not recommended' category. But even some of the trimmers we do recommend caused us headaches. We really don't think the appearance of so many problems in such a short time is acceptable, and urge manufacturers to improve the reliability of their products.

■ The lines supplied with the **JONSERED GT30L** and the **WEED EATER XT30** frequently broke off at the eyelet on the spool cover. The **JONSERED GT30L** was particularly bad: in long grass, the line broke almost instantly; when performing easier tasks it took up to a few minutes. Whenever this happens, the line wound inside the spool slackens. So you have to stop the trimmer, remove the spool, unwind the slackened line, rewind it tightly and replace the spool — a task that's very annoying if you have to do it every few minutes.

To check if the supplied lines were faulty, we tested two other brands of line. The **JONSERED GT30L** improved only slightly, while the **WEED EATER XT30** improved noticeably but the line still broke much more often than with the other trimmers. We therefore don't recommend either of these two models, even though they performed well during the short periods they were working properly.

■ Part of the way through the test, the starting cord of the **HUSQVARNA Mondo** didn't fully recoil — about 30 cm remained dangling out of the housing. However, the length of cord that had recoiled was sufficient to start the motor for the remaining tests.

■ At the very end of our tests, the starting cord of the **STIHL FS36** didn't fully retract — about 10 cm remained dangling out of the housing. When our tester moved the handle of the cord a little while the trimmer was running, the recoiling mechanism engaged so violently that the cord broke. The manufacturer says that if you slowly release the cord and allow it to rewind, this situation should not arise.

PROFILES

Models in the *What to buy* section are profiled in rank order, but check that section, left, for advice on which trimmer is best for which intended uses. Prices shown are a good target to aim for, based on prices collected in September and October 1996.



RYOBI WEED WASP RWT285SS

Price: \$200

A powerful trimmer that's comfortable to use and cuts well in all situations. Check any Ryobi you buy has a so-called 'speed spool' — we had problems in our test with earlier models (they're now discontinued but may still be found in shops).

Good points

- One of the top performers, able to handle tougher jobs.
- Very easy to respool.
- Translucent fuel tank with a very large filler hole, so you can see how much fuel you have left and filling is easier.
- Three-position choke lever for easy starting.
- No reliability problems in this test.

Bad points

- Exhaust is hot on the user's arm when edging.
- Amongst the heaviest trimmers tested.
- Narrow stand: easily falls over when put on uneven ground.



STIHL FS36

Price: \$230

If you need strong performance, this is a very well balanced, powerful trimmer that is comfortable to use and cuts well in all situations. However, its bad points for ease of use (see below) let it down.

Good points

- One of the top performers — can handle tougher jobs.

Bad points

- No markings on spool to indicate the direction of winding, and no instructions for respooling either. If you do it the wrong way, the line feed mechanism doesn't work properly.
- Enclosed fuel tank — so you can't see how much fuel you have left and filling is difficult even though the filling hole is large.
- Pull cord broke during the test (see *Problems*, left).
- Can only be serviced with special tools.
- Amongst the heaviest trimmers tested.



HUSQVARNA MONDO

Price: \$250

Comfortable to use and cuts well in most situations. It can cut thick, long grass but is very slow at doing so.

Good points

- Easy to respool.
- Translucent fuel tank.
- On/off switch well located on handle.
- Three-position choke lever for easy starting.

Bad points

- Part-way through the test, the pull cord didn't fully retract (see picture above), but could still be operated.
- Amongst the heaviest trimmers tested.



MCCULLOCH PM1

Price: \$200

A bulky but powerful trimmer that cuts well in all situations.

Good points

- One of the top performers, able to handle tougher jobs.
- Translucent fuel tank.
- Three-position choke lever for easy starting.
- No reliability problems in this test.

Bad points

- Exhaust is hot on the user's arm.
- Main handle too thick.
- Amongst the heaviest trimmers tested.
- On/off switch can't be reached by thumb when holding handle.

WEED EATER XT25 FEATHER LITE

Price: \$180

The best choice for well maintained yards. It's a light, well balanced trimmer that is very comfortable to use and cuts well enough in most situations. It can cut overgrown edges slowly, but performs poorly in thick, long grass.

Good points

- Very easy to respool.
- Translucent fuel tank.
- The least amount of vibration of the models tested.
- The lightest trimmer in the test.
- Three-position choke lever for easy starting.
- The quietest trimmer tested.
- No reliability problems in this test.

Bad points

- You won't be happy with it if you let your grass get badly overgrown.
- On/off switch must be held in off position until motor stops.

Weed Eater XT25 Feather Lite

PETROL LAWN TRIMMERS

1

2

2

	Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Warranty (years)	Target price (\$)*	Length (m)	Weight (kg)	Provision for shoulder harness	C
equal	RYOBI Weed Wasp RWT285SS	Ryobi	US	1	200	1.4	5.1	✓	✓
	STIHL FS36	Stihl	US	1	230	1.5	5.0		✓
	HUSQVARNA Mondo	Husqvarna	US	1 (C)	250	1.5	4.9		✓
equal	MCCULLOCH PM1	Masport	Mexico	(D)	200	1.4	5.2		✓
	WEED EATER XT25 Feather Lite	Electrolux	US	1	180	1.3	3.3		
	HOMELITE HLT-15	Homelite	US	2	180	1.4	4.0	✓	
	HOMELITE SX135	Homelite	US	2	180	1.4	4.0	✓	
equal	JONSERED GT21L	MTD Products	US	1	190	1.4	4.1		
	MCCULLOCH Roadrunner III (A)	Masport	Mexico	(D)	170	1.3	4.8		
	TRIMRITE TR2515	Gantech	US / S Africa	1	200	1.4	4.7	✓	
NOT RECOMMENDED									
	JONSERED GT30L	MTD Products	US	1	240	1.5	5.6		✓
	WEED EATER XT30 (B)	Electrolux	US	1	200	1.4	4.8		

Which brands needed the most repairs?

We asked a group of subscribers whether their petrol lawn trimmer had needed repair during the past 12 months, and whether they would buy the same brand again. The graphs on the right show the results for the brands for which we got sufficient answers (the number in brackets tells you how many readers reported on the brand).

About 20% of people indicated they had their lawn trimmer repaired. The average cost of the repair was around \$63, with the line feed mechanism and starting being the main problems.

Percentage not needing repair

Black & Decker (120)	88
Kawasaki (77)	86
Ryobi (570)	83
Homelite (51)	80
Echo (111)	79
Weed Eater (62)	79
Stihl (272)	77
Victa (51)	77
Eager Beaver (93)	71
McCulloch (135)	67

Percentage who would buy the same brand again

Kawasaki (82)	93
Stihl (276)	91
Echo (112)	89
Ryobi (580)	81
Homelite (54)	80
Black & Decker (123)	72
Victa (52)	69
Eager Beaver (97)	67
McCulloch (142)	66
Weed Eater (63)	60



Earmuffs, goggles, sturdy shoes and long trousers are a must to protect yourself from flying debris. You should also keep bystanders, pets and cars well away.

SAFETY

- Wear goggles or even a face shield, earmuffs, sturdy shoes and long trousers to protect you against flying debris. Earmuffs are a must to protect you against the considerable noise the petrol lawn trimmers in our test produced (93-100 dB at the user's position).
- If your skin is sensitive to plant sap, you may want to wear long sleeves and gloves as well.
- Before you start trimming, clear the area of sticks, rocks, wire and other objects that could be thrown up or get entangled in the cutting head.
- Be particularly careful when edging and check whether your car is in the firing line.
- Make sure the safety guard (see *What to look for* on page 42) is intact before using the trimmer.
- Only operate the trimmers in this test with nylon line as recommended by the manufacturer — never with wire, plastic-coated wire or a metal blade.
- Keep bystanders and pets well away (at least 10 metres) to protect them from flying debris and noise.
- Don't smoke while refuelling and operating a petrol lawn trimmer and keep it away from open fires.
- Don't operate it in confined areas.
- Move away from refuelling site before starting trimmer.

4	5	6	7	8	9	
Spool type	Noise at user's position / 7.5 m (dB)	Line feed mechanism	Performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)
b	98 / 82	Good	75	70	73	RYOBI Weed Wasp RWT285SS
d	99 / 81	Good	80	65	73	STIHL FS36
c	95 / 77	Good	70	70	70	HUSQVARNA Mondo
c	95 / 77	Good	75	65	70	McCULLOCH PM1
a	93 / 76	Good	60	80	70	WEED EATER XT25 Feather Lite
d	97 / 79	Good	70	65	68	HOMELITE HLT-15
d	97 / 80	Good	70	65	68	HOMELITE SX135
a	96 / 79	Good	70	65	68	JONSERED GT21L
c	100 / 84	Good	75	60	68	McCULLOCH Roadrunner III (A)
c	95 / 79	Good	70	65	68	TRIMRITE TR2515
a	98 / 83	Poor	80	65	73	JONSERED GT30L
a	199 / 86	Poor	80	65	73	WEED EATER XT30 (B)

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on checks in September and October 1996.

(A) Replaced by identical model MAC 2816, but may still be found in shops.

(B) Model discontinued but may still be found in shops

(C) Optional two-year warranty

(D) Two years for engine, one year for lower driver and attachments.

All trimmers in the test have the following features:

Bump line-feed system, length-of-line limiting blade, adjustable second handle, safety guard, instruction manual.

1 Length

Depending on the trimmer's design, you may need to stoop while using it, which can cause backache (see *What to look for* on page 42).

2 Weight/provision for shoulder harness

The weight is a good indicator of how tiring to use the trimmer will be, although its balance is very important as well. If you want to trim a large area with a heavy model, a shoulder harness can be very helpful (see *What to look for*).

3 Clutch

A clutch makes the trimmer safer and more convenient to use (see *What to look for*).

4 Spool type

■ An 'a' in this column indicates that the trimmer operates with a single spinning line which is wound into a single compartment of the spool. This type is easy to rewind.

■ A 'b' indicates that the trimmer operates with two spinning lines. Unlike with all the other types, you don't have to disassemble the cutting head to rewind the spool. Instead, you insert the two ends of a single piece of line into the eyelets. Then you wind the line onto the spool by turning a ring until there's only a loop of line left, which you cut in half. This type is easy and fast to rewind.

■ A 'c' indicates that the trimmer operates with two spinning lines and the spool has two compartments. To rewind it, you need to fold a length of line in half and wind the two ends into the two compartments. This type is easy to rewind.

■ A 'd' is similar to type 'c', but uses two single lines instead of folding a single piece in half. This type can be a bit fiddly to rewind.

5 Noise at user's position/7.5 m away

You need to wear ear protection when using a petrol lawn trimmer (see *Safety*, left).

6 Line feed mechanism

The JONSERED GT30L and WEED EATER XT30 had constant problems with their line feed mechanism — to the extent that we can't recommend them. See *Problems* on page 42 for details.

7 Performance score

The following tests were included in the performance assessment:

- Horizontal trimming along fences.
- Vertical edging along paths.
- Slashing long grass.

Right at the end of our tests, the Stihl's pull cord broke — another example of reliability problems we found with several models in this test.

8 Ease of use score

The following tests were included in the ease of use assessment:

- Ease of horizontal cutting.
- Ease of vertical cutting (edging).
- Amount of vibration during use.
- Ease of respooling.

9 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of performance and ease of use, weighted as follows:

- Performance score: 50%.
- Ease of use score: 50%.

A 'poor' assessment for the line feed mechanism led to the trimmer being 'not recommended', regardless of its overall score.



RECALLS & BANS

THE PRODUCT: The NSW Minister for Fair Trading has placed three-month interim bans on the supply of the following folding cots: **Travel D'Lite, Play D'Lite, Rest D'Lite, Happy Camper, Home & Away, Home & Room, Chicco Travelling Cot, Babycraft Portable Cot, Ezicot, Fold-a-Cot, and Nap'n Play.**

The problem: The NSW Department of Fair Trading became aware of the dangers of this style of cot when a recall of **Home & Room** and **Baby Express** portable cots took place in the US, after two deaths and two near deaths occurred when the cots collapsed. The hazard arises if the sides aren't fully locked in place or if the child is able to manipulate the lock by rotating the U-shaped bracket, which then leads to the side collapsing.

What to do: Safety notices have been issued for some of the cots (see below, and *Recalls and Bans*, December 1996). Stop using the cot immediately and await further advice. The NSW Products Safety Committee has been asked to look at the safety of all portable folding cots and advise the Minister on what action should be taken.

THE PRODUCT: Isuzu-General Motors has recalled the **Holden Frontera Sport**, built from October 1995 to June 1996, with the following VIN range: SED55UD25V733004 to SED55UD27V825158, Tag No. F780080 to Tag No. F790472.

The problem: Damage or failure of the exhaust system tailpipe through aging or external interference may result in high levels of heat radiation from the exhaust gases in the fuel tank area, which could damage the fuel tank components.

What to do: Contact any Holden dealership to arrange to have a protective cover fitted to the fuel tank free of charge. For further information, contact the Service Department of any Holden dealership.

THE PRODUCT: 3M Pharmaceuticals has recalled the **Respolin Autohaler 400 Dose**, batch 26988, use-by date May '99. The product can be identified by the batch number and the words "Use by May '99" appearing on the carton end flap, or by the words "Demonstrator Unit" printed on the mouthpiece.

The problem: Some models incorrectly have the statement "Demonstrator Unit" printed on the autohaler's mouthpiece adaptor, which could confuse some consumers into believing these units are for demonstration purposes.

What to do: If you have one of them, return it to the place of purchase for replacement. For further information contact 1800 815 114.

THE PRODUCT: Franklins No Frills, Franklins Big Fresh, Franklins Fresh and Franklins Liquor Save in NSW, the ACT and Queensland have recalled 'Cathay' Children's Toy Magnetic Numbers, APN 9310172158098.

The problem: The magnets in the back of the numbers can become loose and could be a choking hazard for a small child.

What to do: Return the product to your nearest Franklins store for a full refund. For further information, contact 1800 621 111 or (02) 9722 1409.

THE PRODUCT: Grace Bros and Myer have recalled **Brass Mantel Christmas Stocking Hangers, in Christmas Star and Christmas Tree** designs, sold recently through stores nationally.

The problem: The points of the hangers are sharp. As the hanger is not fixed at any point, injury could occur should the hanger fall or be pulled from the mantel.

What to do: Return the product(s) to your nearest Grace Bros or Myer store for a full refund. For further information, contact 1800 800 556, weekdays.

THE PRODUCT: Defender has issued a consumer notice on **Defender Rose and Blackspot pump pack spray.**

The problem: Some sprays may not be made exactly to specification and may cause some burning to plant leaves.

What to do: If you bought this product since October 1, 1996, check to see if there's a batch number on the base of the product or near the barcode on the back label. If there isn't, don't use the product and contact Defender on 1800 814 782 for a replacement.

THE PRODUCT: Modern Teaching Aids has recalled the **Amibi Toys Bird Trumpet E95**, which has been on sale since 1995.

The problem: The plastic parts which make up the handle of the moving part of the trumpet may come apart, and could be a choking hazard for children under three.

What to do: Stop using this product and return it to Modern Teaching Aids or to the store of purchase for a full refund. For further information contact the Product Recall Co-ordinator on (02) 9939 2355 or 1800 251 497.

THE PRODUCT: Grace Bros and Myer have recalled **Sporting Edge Electric Treadmills**, 1/2 Horsepower model, 3/4 Horsepower model, and 1 Horsepower model, sold since January 1996.

The problem: The treadmills may pose an electrical hazard to users.

What to do: Don't use the treadmill. A simple modification will be made in customers' homes, free of charge, to eliminate the hazard. For further information contact 1800 811 611.

THE PRODUCT: Target has recalled the **Target Ultimate Motorised Treadmill**, model no. STP 5010, which has been on sale since August 3, 1996.

The problem: The insulation on certain wires may shift, leaving them exposed and posing an electric shock hazard.

What to do: Target will arrange for a qualified electrician to come to your home and fix the problem. Contact your nearest Target store. For further information, contact the Customer Relations Department on 008 814 788.

THE PRODUCT: Ferrero Australia is recalling **Kinder Surprise** sold between January 1996 and November 19, 1996.

The problem: Some Kinder Surprise contain toys which feature a metal ring as a component. If placed on a child's finger, the ring may be hard to remove. Toys which are already assembled present no problem.

What to do: Ferrero will replace any unopened Kinder Surprise with a use-by date prior to June 20, 1997. Send it by PostPak to Ferrero Australia, 118 Alfred Street, Milsons Point 2061. You will also be reimbursed for the cost of PostPak and postage. For further information, contact 1800 627 231.

THE PRODUCT: The Manufacturer of **Burgen Loaf** has recalled **Burgen Barley and Sunflower Seed 680g**

loaf (yellow and orange bag), purchased prior to November 14, 1996 (regardless of the use-by date).

The problem: Possible inclusion of foreign matter in one of the ingredients.

What to do: If you've frozen this bread for future use, don't eat it. Dispose of it and return the packaging to: Manufacturer of Burgen Loaf, Consumer Services, PO Box 189, Chatswood 2067. A full refund together with postage will be sent via return mail. For further information, contact 1800 645 515.

THE PRODUCT: Sunbeam has recalled the **Andis Animal Clipper**, model AG, App. No. CS5250N.

The problem: The user may receive an electric shock from the metal screws that secure the housing.

What to do: The clipper can be identified by 'MODEL AG' on the label or the above App. No. Contact 1800 025 059 (weekdays) or your nearest Sunbeam Service Centre, where the clipper will be inspected and fixed free of charge.

THE PRODUCT: Queensco Unity Dairyfoods has recalled a limited batch of **DairyLite-Lo Reduced-fat Milk**, in 2 litre plastic bottles, use-by date 27 October, 1996. It was distributed in the Redcliffe area, and in Caboolture, Gympie, Tewantin, Toowoomba, far SW Queensland, Ipswich and the Brisbane Valley. This product was not sold in the Brisbane region.

The problem: It may contain traces of a diluted cleaning solution. The affected product has an unpleasant taste and smell, but doesn't pose a serious threat.

What to do: If you have frozen this milk for future use, don't drink it. Queensco will replace it. To arrange a pick-up and exchange, or for further information, contact 1800 627 624.

THE PRODUCT: The Chien Wah Trading Co has recalled **Pearl River**

SAFETY NOTICE

THE PRODUCT: CO White has issued a public safety notice for **Home & Away Travel Cot, Home & Room Travel Cot and Childcare Travel Cot**, model numbers CC100, CC280, CC440 and CC200, on sale between 1992 and early 1996.

The problem: Following recent events surrounding the safety of some portable cots, a safety notice for the above cots has been issued. This safety notice doesn't relate to the Easy & Lite (CC600) and Packaway (CC7510) models.

What to do: If you own one or more of these models, return it for assessment. To arrange this, or for any queries, contact CO White on 1800 150 097 (phone) or 1800 150 059 (fax), weekdays.

Bridge Brand Mushroom Soy and Superior Soy in 500 mL glass bottles, distributed to most major supermarkets, distributors, wholesalers and retailers throughout Australia. Affected bottles have serial numbers which include the letters ACI GD Z or ACI GD Z... etched at the foot of the bottle.

The problem: Glass fragments may be in the product.

What to do: Don't use it. Return it to the nearest place of purchase for a full refund. For further information contact Chien Wah Trading Co on (03) 9489 4544 (phone), (03) 9486 2151 (fax).

THE PRODUCT: Sunbeam has recalled the filter basket from the 'Pure Juice' extractor, model no JED50A.

The problem: The filter basket may break during use and injure the operator.

What to do: Stop using the product. For further information call toll-free 1800 025 059 (weekdays).

THE PRODUCT: Willow Ware Australia has recalled defective Insulated Sports Bottle Caps for 500 mL and 1 litre bottles, available from major retailers between July and mid August 1996.

The problem: If dislodged, this stopper valve may be a problem in the hands of unsupervised children. Most stoppers require considerable pressure to remove them, but some may be dislodged with only reasonable pressure.

What to do: Test your bottle cap, and if it's easy to dislodge the stopper, send the cap with your name, address and the size of the bottle to the following address, and you will be sent a new cap: Customer Service, Willow Ware Australia P/L, Reply Paid No. 1170, North Melbourne 3051.

THE PRODUCT: Haigh Australia has recalled towballs marked 2,300 kg, in black or chrome plate, sold about two years ago.

The problem: The product doesn't meet Australian standards, and may chip or crack under the pressure of towing.

What to do: Stop using it. If your product is found to be faulty, Haigh Australia will refund your original purchase price. If you believe your towball may be faulty, contact Haigh Australia, PO Box 130, Ferntree Gully 3156; phone (03) 9763 0666.

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